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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sarah Elizabeth Blakistone entitled "Mutilatto." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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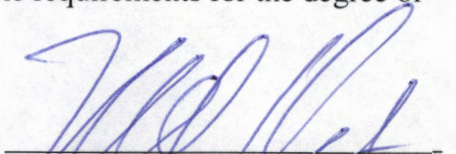
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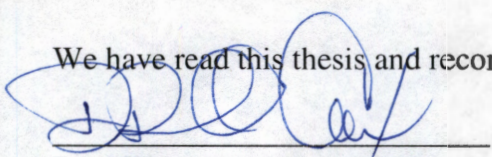
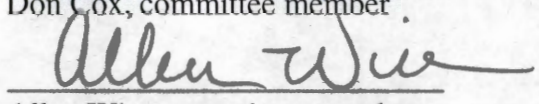
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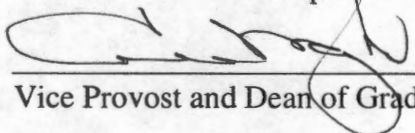
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Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:


Don Cox, committee member
Allen Wier, committee member

Accepted for the Council:


Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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MUTILATTO

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sarah Elizabeth Blakistone
August 2003

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First of all, I would like to thank my committee members, Michael Knight, Don Cox, and Allen Wier, for their patience throughout this process. Through all the delays and rescheduling, they never batted an eye. I would also like to thank my mother. Without her, this thesis would never have been completed. Thanks as well to Mark Collins, former fifth grade teacher and constant friend, who has encouraged me to write ever since I can remember.

Abstract

Mutilatto contains five works of short fiction that have a central theme: women and their identities. Each work explores one woman, sometimes from her own point of view and sometimes not, whose self-identity often conflicts with the identity those around her perceive. This work also explores the theme of victimhood—how women become victims, and how they often make victims of themselves. Essentially, each of the characters, Stella, Janey, Caroline, Jenna, and Sandra, is maimed in some way, either literally or figuratively, and yet the fact that they are maimed does not make them victims. All have free will, all are in control of their actions, and all make choices for themselves and are ultimately responsible for what happens to them.

These stories are based on the idea that, even though we may have no control over what happens to us, we all make decisions that affect our lives. It's a simple premise, but one that gets overlooked. Each of these characters has a difficult life, but it is not right to simply say that each was dealt a bad hand. Stella and Janey could leave home, Caroline could stop being so polite, Jenna could have reached her epiphany sooner, and Sandra could simply choose to be normal. Though all of them are acted upon by outside forces, to a degree, none of them can truly blame anyone else for what their lives have become.

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1. Introduction: Coffee and Cigarettes

I had trouble coming up with the title for this collection of stories. I decided on *Mutilatto* only after my thesis committee intervened, but the title that had occurred to me originally was *Coffee and Cigarettes*. It started out as a joke because each of the main characters in this collection either smokes, drinks coffee, or both. Over five stories, it seems like I could have come up with something else for them to do while sitting still, like nail-biting, or tearing paper into bits, or even knitting, but coffee and cigarettes are what I gave them. This was not a conscious decision on my part. While I was writing the stories, I consumed so much of both myself that it never occurred to me that people who were nervous or anxious would ever do anything else. In this way, I am present in every story I wrote.

When I think about it now, the title I decided on is actually an apt one. It embodies a theme in each of the stories, though in such a subtle way that even I had to struggle to figure it out. The theme is this: identity. I thought at first that this collection was about something else, maybe feminism, or the different ways people become both physically and mentally maimed, and these are certainly minor themes. But the question of identity is so much more central to each story. What does that have to do with smoking and drinking coffee? Those are things that I do, things that I have become known for, and

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things that are necessary to the process of writing. When people want to find me on campus, they look for someone standing out in the cold, clutching a travel mug of coffee for warmth and trying not to set her gloves on fire. It is at moments like that one that I feel like a student. When I am up late at night, jittery and sick from tossing back cups of coffee and chain-smoking, I feel like a writer. A cigarette grounds me, it makes me feel like I have a right to stand where I am standing, or a reason for existing at that place and at that moment. The coffee helps to soothe my throat so I can suck down one more smoke.

The presence of coffee and cigarettes in each story shows the tension and anxiety of the characters. They could just as easily be biting their nails, but that would be so undignified. There's just no glamour in it. Coffee and cigarettes confer an automatic New York-sophistication. J.D. Salinger uses a similar prop in his stories and novels. To show that his characters are sophisticated and world weary, at least in their own minds, Salinger serves up a lot of gin and cigarettes. His story, "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," is about two women getting drunk and figuring out where they went wrong. Even though neither of them is very old, both are already sick of the world. I can easily see some of my own characters in the same situation. Sandra, for example, could sit on a sofa and have a cup of coffee with Jack, from "Vagina Dentata," and they could talk about how they both have the world figured out.

Of course, the question of identity is more complicated than what the characters consume in my stories. The outward signs, though, are helpful because they show a certain inner tension. In "Mutilatto," Stella watches her hands as she stirs milk and sugar into her coffee and thinks about how far she wants to follow in her father's footsteps. If

she chooses to become another Mutilatto, she adopts an identity that was chosen for her, rather than the one she would choose for herself. She wants to please her father because she loves him, but she also hates him because only a total concession will make him proud of her. The story doesn't suggest a firm resolution on Stella's part, mostly because the issue is almost impossible to solve. She may never realize that she has options in life, or talents outside of those she has inherited from her father, but she is self-aware enough to know that she is dissatisfied with the path that is open to her. Forming an identity that is entirely independent from family influences is impossible for her and she is left to watch helplessly as the same thing happens to her little brother.

"Masking" follows "Mutilatto" in this collection because it deals with a similar situation. Both stories have an invalid parent whose daughter has to be the caregiver. Janey has conflicting feelings about her mother, just as Stella does about her father. In Janey's case, though, she has been forced to give up her identity altogether. She has to leave her home and her job to move in with her mother and take care of her as she suffers through Parkinson's disease. The title is relevant in two ways. In a literal sense, masking is a symptom of Parkinson's disease. Symbolically, Janey's identity is masked by her mother's illness. She is no longer a person; she is a caregiver. Her only social contact outside of her mother is with the part-time nurse, or the neighbor who comes over to drink coffee with her and bum cigarettes. When Janey is alone, she drinks coffee, smokes, and either works crossword puzzles or stares out of the window. She is trapped even when she is alone because she cannot leave her mother unsupervised. She waits in limbo until she is needed once again.

“Vagina Dentata” is the only story with a male protagonist, and even so, the main focus is on the female character, Caroline. Jack is basically a stalker who starts out as an ex-boyfriend and becomes increasingly obsessed with the woman who broke up with him. Caroline works as a waitress and Jack uses this as an excuse to see her, but tells himself that he is only stopping by for a cup of coffee. When she is home, he drives past her house, pretending that he is just going to the store to buy cigarettes. In this story, Caroline has no identity at all. All that is known of her is filtered through Jack, who is obviously unreliable. He assigns motives to her words and actions that are self-serving. He chooses to believe that she does not really want him out of her life and is only playing coy games to keep him interested. Caroline is his victim in more than one sense. Not only is a psychopath stalking her; she is also completely deprived of a voice. She is not allowed to explain her actions or defend herself, and by the end, Jack has made her into something monstrous. His own identity, as he sees himself, differs from what the reader sees. Jack believes he is Caroline’s victim, while the reader realizes that he is completely crazy.

Identity is an issue most obviously in “Getting Back to Normal.” Jenna is a rape victim who both loves and hates that label. She does not wish to be considered a victim her whole life, but she doesn’t know how to find a different identity for herself that will be meaningful. She tries to find a new identity in a support group that dubs its members “rape survivors,” but even this is unsatisfying. Jenna doesn’t have anything in common with these women. To her mind, they are victims, not of rape, but of themselves. They’re too timid to recreate their lives. They are too timid even to drink real coffee, preferring more soothing beverages instead, and the decaf coffee they serve at the meetings is the

final straw. Jenna gives up in disgust and realizes that she has no place among these women who talk of nothing but getting back to normal. Getting back to normal, for her, is a terrifying prospect because she does not like herself much. The rape is a catalyst for her inner-change, forcing Jenna to become more self-aware and to realize that she is unhappy. She has to deal with her desire to make a better life for herself than the one she was leading, yet she is fundamentally the same. She doesn't have the skills to be a different person from the one she has always been.

"Sandra" is about a woman who creates a complete identity for herself. She has delusions of grandeur and believes that there is something special about her that elevates her above common humanity. She creates herself from the outside-in, as if her outward behavior has the power to change who she is and, in this case, make her more than human. Her outward appearance is entirely artificial, from her dyed hair, to her shaved arms, to her sun-protected white skin. She has trained herself to eat human flesh and she believes that doing so makes her powerful and god-like. The only normal substance she consumes is coffee. She drinks it while she sits at an outdoor café, hiding behind her paper cup as she selects her next victim.

"Sandra" is intended to be a humorous story, one that is ridiculous and pokes fun at people who assume that walking the walk and talking the talk mean anything at all. If she is truly a god, as she believes she is, she has to work awfully hard at it. Her character reminds me of the "Goth" kids I always used to see loitering on the Downtown Mall in Charlottesville, Virginia, where I grew up. Most of them were teenagers from good homes who wore torn up black clothes (purchased at shops specializing in Goth merchandise), white face make-up, and listened to bands like Marilyn Manson.

“Mutilatto” also makes attempts at humor, though obviously not humor of the slapstick variety. “Vagina Dentata” was originally intended to be a much funnier story, though a lot of the humor was lost in the revisions.

Identity, as far as how people are perceived, and how they perceive themselves, is worthy of serious contemplation, but it can often be funny, or at least ridiculous. I have always tried hard to stress the humorous, or at least satirical, elements in my stories. In fact, I am defensive about it when people misinterpret my intentions. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about why I am that way, and what I have come up with is this: I don’t want anyone to think that I use my stories the way Goths use black clothes. My stories are not a banner I wave to tell the world I’m bleak. I am not angst ridden, I am not morbid (well, not very, anyway), and I do not listen to Marilyn Manson in the dark.

How my writing is perceived became a serious issue for me in the seventh grade. My English class was doing a poetry unit, and we were supposed to write a variety of poems in different styles and put together an anthology for our parents. The teacher, Mrs. Pesch, let some of us read our poems out loud, and when it was my turn, after the initial silence in the wake of the poem, she asked me, “Does you family write for the obituaries column?” I don’t remember which came first, the comment or the label, but at some point, I became known around school as “the weird pessimistic girl.” I was devastated. The assumption that Mrs. Pesch, and many others, made was that I was morbid and pessimistic for the sake of being morbid and pessimistic, as if there were no underlying reason for being that way except to put on a good show for people.

These days, I get similar reactions when I show people my writing. “Why does everything you write have to be so *dark*?” people ask me and then say, “I’d love to see

you write something different.” Other than the assumption that there is something wrong with being dark, what bothers me is that people often fail to see the satirical intent.

Stories like “Mutilatto” or “Sandra” are not meant to be taken literally. I don’t intend for people even to suspend their disbelief while they read them. They’re works of fiction, and there is a real message in there somewhere, but they’re also intended to be entertainment.

I imagine that Stephen King had to endure comments about his own dark side earlier in his career. I’m sure he was asked all the time why he wrote horror novels instead of “something serious.” Why would he want to write about death and monsters? Probably, a lot of my own desire to write about dark subject matter is due to a steady diet of Stephen King from when I was eight years old. The first novel I read, *Cujo*, was terrifying. I steered clear of dogs for weeks after that. And even today, because I read *It*, I am wary of all shower and storm drains. King’s books scared me, but they also fascinated me. I wanted to be scared and horrified. It was fun to read about rabid demon dogs and haunted hotels. In fact, King’s most realistic books are the ones that are the scariest. *The Shining* and *Cujo* are about everyday things that turn bad, and the idea that something familiar, something that you trust, can turn on you, is just about the worst thing I can imagine.

I am drawn to other dark writers as well, and most of them aren’t horror writers. I like John Irving a lot, and I can’t help but think about *The World According to Garp*, where tragedy after tragedy occurs until the novel is almost ridiculous. Probably the darkest scene is the car accident where Garp hits another car, containing his wife and her lover. The sum total of damage: the wife bites off her lover’s penis, one of Garp’s children loses his eye, and the other child is killed. It is a dark and tragic scene, except

that what happens to the lover is funny. Another of Irving's novels, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, has a character who is raped by a boy she knows, and even after the rape she sends him letters because she imagines she is still in love with him. This book makes me feel more justified about my own story. In "Getting Back to Normal," Jenna says at one point that she is glad she was raped, and even though this seems like a completely sick idea, it's not unimaginable.

One of my favorite dark books that I fell in love with as a teenager is John Fowles's *The Collector*, which is about a man who kidnaps a girl he has always admired from a distance. He plans the whole thing so well that he even buys an expensive house in a remote location so that he will have a place to hide her. He keeps her in his basement until she dies. The creepiest thing is not the kidnapper's story, but his victim's. She keeps a journal during her captivity and her thought process, from wanting to fight him, to wanting to charm him into letting her go, is eerie. Even when she is sick and dying, she believes he will ultimately have to let her go. The darkest moment is when she begins to realize that if she dies, no one will ever know what happened to her. Looking back on it now, Fowles's novel must have influenced "Vagina Dentata." The concept of a vagina dentata is what initially inspired me to write, but the direction the story took could easily be due to Fowles.

There is no end to the dark stories and writers that have made impressions on me, either good or bad. Jean Rhys is one of my favorites. She writes some of the best pathetic female characters, who are outwardly tough and inwardly weak. Edith Wharton is another favorite of mine. Her female characters are not all that different from Rhys's. Lily Bart, from *The House of Mirth*, and Ellen Olenska, from *The Age of Innocence*, are both

independent and strong-willed but they have major character flaws that make them weak. Both writers make me want to create female characters who are just as believable, and just as tragic. If I had written *The House of Mirth*, however, I don't think I would have had Lily Bart kill herself. This does not mean that I would write a happy ending (I can't shake that morbid and pessimistic image yet), but the suicide seems too easy. I had the same reaction to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, except that whereas I like Lily Bart, I never liked Edna Pontelier. I've always thought she was too flighty, and that she was a quitter.

Thomas Hardy is a writer I have come to respect, and while I struggle with his writing style, I have to appreciate his sense of tragedy. His novels are ridiculous in the same way Irving's are ridiculous. They're not supposed to be humorous, but there is something about disaster piled on disaster that makes me laugh. I read *Far From the Madding Crowd* recently, and the scene where Gabriel Oak loses his livelihood is tragic but hilarious. Oak is a shepherd who is trying to work for himself, but his dream ends when his young, untrained sheepdog herds every one of his hundreds of sheep over the edge of a cliff to die in a huge, woolly pile. I have trouble believing that Hardy didn't crack a smile when he wrote that scene. *Jude the Obscure* is equally tragic. Jude, who is out of work, and whose lover refuses to marry him, comes home to find that his oldest son has hung his siblings and himself "because we were too menny." His lover leaves him, Jude is tricked into returning to his shrewish first wife, and then he dies. Maybe there is nothing funny about it, but there is something that keeps people reading until the end. You just have to find out what will happen next to poor Jude.

Obviously, there is an appeal in darkness. Maybe it's an instinct in common with the one that makes people slow down at bad highway accidents: they're hoping to see something gruesome, and they're glad it didn't happen to them. Personally, I do not slow down when I see a car crash on. I am terrified that if I turn my head to look, I might actually see someone bleeding on the road. I can read about car crashes, and even relish the gory details, or I can watch them on television. I am only squeamish about real life. Under the guise of fiction, tragedy is much easier to take. I know car crashes are real, but I can always pretend that I am somehow immune to them. I know dogs sometimes get rabies, like Cujo did, but I can always pretend that all dog owners are like me, and take their pets to the vet for vaccinations.

My real life sensitivity to tragedy and gore may be why I get so upset when I am accused of being dark, or asked if my family writes obituaries. Writing is a safe place to explore darkness, but there is a huge difference between fiction and real life. I myself am not dark. In fact, as I sit here, typing the last words of this introduction and so close to finishing my Master's Thesis, I am drinking a final cup of coffee and smoking one last cigarette. When I save this file and print it out, I plan to go outside. It's a nice summer day, one of the few this year that hasn't been dark and rainy. I want to sit in the sun, drink water, eat a healthy lunch, and watch my rabies-free dog chew grass in the yard. At that moment, I will stop being a writer and leave all the "morbid pessimism" behind me in these pages.

2. Mutilatto

Bobby drags himself across the floor on his elbows. There is something in his mouth.

“Bobby, would you get out of here? I have to get dressed. And for god’s sake, take that foot out of your mouth.” Stella is getting ready for work and would like some privacy.

The foot belongs to Bolo Hone, their father. It is slightly gray, but the formaldehyde keeps it well preserved. It’s a memento from the glory days of his career. Bolo can’t stand to look at it, so Bobby has adopted it. He takes it everywhere. It sits under his chair at dinnertime and is tucked into bed with him at night. Sometimes, when Stella finds it abandoned in the house, usually while Bobby is at school, she washes it in rubbing alcohol and distilled water. It might not be completely sterile, but it makes her feel better, especially when she sees him carrying it in his mouth.

Bobby does not leave Stella’s room. He looks at her until she demands, “What do you want?” He sighs, puts his feet on the floor, and stands up. He rubs his elbows, which are pockmarked with impressions from the carpet. Bobby Hone—the contortionist.

“Dad wants you. He says he’s hungry.”

“Tell him I’ll fix something as soon as I get dressed.” Bobby walks out of the room, on his feet this time. When he does this, which is not often, there is no sign that there is anything unusual about him. Stella watches him leave, a ten-year-old boy, small for his age, his narrow shoulders hunched, his head down, and wonders for a minute if she should call him back.

She takes off her bathrobe and does a quick survey. There are a few open cuts on her arms and legs that will have to be bandaged, but everything else is healing nicely. She uses flesh-colored bandages, which her manager tells her are still visible, even from the tables in the back. Although the Blue Light Bar does not require them, Stella puts on pasties and a g-string. Some of the girls dance completely nude, but it doesn’t matter. The patrons at Blue Light do not come for the strip tease. Stella rolls a pair of white thigh-highs up her legs. Tonight, she will wear a nurse’s uniform as a special favor to her best customer. The nurse’s dress is authentic. It was purchased at a medical supply house where Stella buys her bandages at a discount. The six-inch heels—not regulation nursing wear—are Stella’s.

In the kitchen, she makes macaroni and cheese. Bobby loves it. Bolo can’t taste much of anything and does not care what she makes, as long as it is soft. She makes Bobby put his father’s foot on the floor before she will serve him, and he places it under his chair where he can reach it easily. He eats by himself in the kitchen, while she takes her father his dinner. She does not like feeding Bolo but will not let Bobby do it.

Bolo is propped up in bed, supported by three thick pillows. There is a blanket pulled up to his chest. He wears nothing but an old Hanes t-shirt, which, despite the yellow stains under the armpits, is clean.

“Hey, Dad. I’ve got your dinner.”

“Thank you, Stella,” he says, only it sounds like “*Ank oo, Ewwa.*” He opens his mouth for a spoonful of macaroni and for a second she can see inside. Bolo has no teeth and only two-thirds of his tongue. He chews the macaroni between his top and bottom gums. Stella is used to it, but the sight is always slightly nauseating. Frequently, she has to look away.

“Iss coll.” The complaint is standard. The macaroni is watery as well. Stella did not have time to buy milk and butter, and had to mix the cheese powder with tap water to make the sauce. Bolo would complain about this, too, if he could taste anything. As it is, having part of his tongue cut off is a blessing for both of them, since he is picky and Stella is a lousy cook.

After dinner, she gives him a sponge bath. On her nights off, she puts him in the bathtub and washes his hair. Otherwise, she is in too much of a hurry to get to work on time to bother. It doesn’t matter. He never gets dirty. He never gets out of bed.

Stella folds back the blankets and slips Bolo’s shirt over his head. She washes his face first, cleaning off the dribbles of cheese sauce clinging to his stubbly chin. She knows she should shave him, but there isn’t time. She wipes his torso down and cleans under his armpits. She washes all the way down to his hips, then rolls him over and sponges off his back. He has no arms and legs, so the bath goes very quickly. Bolo is not embarrassed about receiving a bath from his daughter. He gets no pleasure from her touch, and besides, there is nothing for her to see. He no longer has a penis or testicles. After his wife died, he said he didn’t need them anymore.

Stella's father—and who hasn't heard of him?—is the Great Mutilatto. Or he was. He's retired now. He had his genitals cut off for his Grand Finale performance. There was nothing else left for him to give. The traveling freak show gave him a gold watch, which he cannot wear, as a retirement present. They also presented him with his left foot, carefully preserved, as a memento of his first amputation.

The Great Mutilatto was not always an amputation specialist. He started his career with basic self-mutilation—razors, knives, fishhooks, piercings. He amazed people with his exceptional tolerance for pain. Volunteers from the audience would rush to the stage to wield the hammer he offered up, the one used to drive nails through Mutilatto's hands and feet, or sometimes through his tongue. They competed for the chance to push needles into his skin until he was covered in metal quills, and they dared him to lift cinder blocks attached to his pierced nipples with heavy chains. More often, he would sit on a stool in total silence, carving elaborate patterns into his flesh with disposable razor blades. Just after they were married, he carved a portrait of his wife on his left thigh. When it healed, it stood out in sharp relief, raised high in white keloid scar tissue. Both the portrait and the thigh are long gone.

For years, people came to see the Great Mutilatto and admire his scars. Suspended from hooks, he would dangle just above his audience, blood dripping from wounds onto the tarpaulin on the floor, or onto the heads of his fans. They could look up to see the raised patterns in his flesh, or reach out a hand to give him a push. He would spin in lazy circles, his skin stretched to its limit where his body weight pulled against the hooks. Sometimes the hooks were in his back, and his torso was exposed to reveal his own abstract designs. At other times, the hooks were placed in the skin over his knees and

thighs, and through his nipples, so that the audience could see his back, with its replica of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* carved there by a local artist.

But his face—his face was the most wonderful. The Great Mutilatto sat for hours in front of mirrors, cutting whorls into his cheeks and forehead, drawing lightning bolts from the corners of his eyes, and tracing careful constellations into his eyelids. He rubbed grease into these patterns, infecting the wounds to make the scars more pronounced, outlining in black the dense mural on his skin. Often, the people who came to see his act were unable to look away from the stark lines and contours on his fierce face.

Like her father, Stella cuts herself for a living. She lacks his artistry, but she makes money as the only exotic dancer who can coordinate razor slashes to pop music. She still has all of her body parts, and Bolo is slightly ashamed of her because of it. He accuses her of not applying herself. He says she is afraid of success. Her mother never said anything when she was alive, but Stella cannot ignore the fact that the family photo albums are filled with pictures of Bolo and Bobby on stage. There are no pictures of Stella's performances.

Tonight, Stella is ready in the wings at the Blue Light Bar. The club specializes in unusual acts. Membership is costly and exclusive; advertisement is by word-of-mouth only. Now that she is no longer just an ordinary stripper, she wishes her mother were alive to see her, or that her father could be there. She wonders if they would be proud of her.

The act just before hers is almost over and she is waiting for her cue. She always dances after Christina Needle, whose fans pay top dollar to push six-inch needles into her

body. Each one has tiny streamers at the end and they flutter rainbow colors when Christina dances. When she comes off stage, Stella helps her by pulling the needles from her back.

Finally, her act is announced: “And now, everybody put your hands together for Stiletto Hone.” The first few beats of Depeche Mode’s “Enjoy the Silence” sound overhead, and then she is on stage.

During the three-minute dance, she is not herself. Partly, it is because at work she is Stiletto Hone, Mistress of the Razor. Partly, it is because she is drunk. The alcohol makes it easy for her to dance in front of strangers; it also thins her blood so it will flow faster and not clot before she is done with her act.

Stiletto swings around the dancer’s pole, wraps one leg around it and spins in a slow arc. When she lets go, she is dizzy, but manages a shaky backbend. She unbuttons her dress and drops the material to the dusty floor. At her old job, she would have taken more time, trying hard to tease her audience, to make tips. The audience at the Blue Light Bar does not want to see a striptease. They can get that at any club for a ten-dollar cover charge and the price of a two-drink minimum. They are here to see Stiletto Hone, Mistress of the Razor.

Stiletto takes the razor from the top of her stocking. She holds it lightly, carefully. She does not want to cut her fingers. She is a graceful girl and the motions of her hands over her body are fluid. She holds the razor blade in front of her face and kisses it before drawing the edge between her breasts and down to her pubic bone. The scratch is shallow and it takes a minute for the first drops of blood to appear. She feels some pressure, only a little pain, but the expression on her face never changes, even when the cuts are deep.

She whirls around, moving the razor to the disco beat. Stiletto dances free form—she knows instinctively how to time her slashes, how hard to press the blade. Someone in the audience calls out, “Come on, baby, let’s see some more blood.” Someone else yells for her to cut off a finger. She takes their money. She does not always take their suggestions.

At the end of her three minutes, she dances over to stage left. A spotlight gleams on her bloody neck and shoulders. Beads of blood roll off her breasts and down her thighs. She catches a man’s eye—her best customer—and holds his gaze. While he watches, she draws the razor blade down the length of her tongue. When he stretches out his hand, she licks his palm, trading her blood for his fifty-dollar bill.

Backstage, she pulls money from her stocking. Even if she is honest when she tips out the bartender and the bouncer, she will make over \$500, and there is still the VIP room. Her best customer is waiting and he will have fists full of cash. Stella puts the nursing uniform back on, and watches the stiff white fabric make Rorschach patterns out of her blood. She is tired and wants to go home. Instead, she goes into the VIP room to do table dances and make small, shallow cuts in her arms and legs. The men are allowed to touch the dancers in this room, but no one touches Stella. There would be no way to explain the bloodstains on their hands and clothes.

Her best customer is different. He asks Stella, as always, to sit on his lap. She protests, afraid that the backs of her thighs might still be bleeding. He spreads a handkerchief over his legs, and then she sits. After more money changes hands, Stella hands him her razor and allows him to trace lines on the insides of her thighs, and over the tops of her breasts. When he moves toward her face, she grabs his wrist and stands

up. “Not my face,” she says. “I’ve told you before.” She stands before him, dress open to her waist, still holding his wrist. Finally, he nods and hands her back the blade.

It is silent in the room, and Stella cannot count the pairs of eyes staring right now. She has a lot of fans, ones she never sees. They are the ones who pay to watch through the peepholes and who hand her requests through the trapdoors: “Cut your ass.” “I want to see you cut that pretty face of yours.” “Why don’t you cut out your eyes?” Sometimes, she wipes the notes in her blood and hands them back.

Stella eats breakfast at a diner with some of the other dancers and stops at a convenience store for milk and butter. It is almost 7 a.m. when she gets home. Bobby is sitting on Bolo’s bed. They are waiting for her. This means Bolo has not slept well. Other times, she has to wake him when she gets home so she can feed him breakfast before she goes to sleep. Today, Bobby is singing to his father from the short repertoire of songs he has learned in school.

Stella calls, “I’m home,” over the lyrics to “Jingle Bells”, and Bobby runs to her. She gives him a hug and pushes his hair out of his eyes. “How was work?” he asks, and she shrugs her shoulders. Her job is something she never talks about, especially with her little brother. She always showers and changes at work, and never lets Bobby see her unless she is sure every trace of blood has been washed away and all the fresh cuts are bandaged. Bobby has seen the scars and knows perfectly well how she got them. She does not tell him, though, that unlike their father, she cuts herself so that afterwards, the audience can go home and masturbate to images of her bloody tits.

Bobby takes her hand and pulls her into Bolo's room. Now that she is home it is time for her to make both of them feel better, to comfort Bobby and to soothe her lonely father. This, along with working and keeping house, is one of her duties. It is bearable only by contrast; things were much worse before her mother died.

Stella tucks Bobby into the bed, next to his father, and then sits down in a chair. This is the ritual, the only thing that will put Bolo to sleep. He is happy to have his children near and to have Stella tell the story of how her parents met. It used to be Bolo's story, but he cannot tell it anymore. His mutilated tongue makes it impossible for him to speak for very long. Bobby leans back on the pillows, sitting close to Bolo, who can no longer put an arm around him. They do not have to ask Stella to begin the story. It is automatic. There is no other reason for them to be together at this hour.

"Do you remember, Daddy, the day you met Mom? It was the summer of 1981, and you were just starting to be famous..."

Bolo and Dona met in a hospital emergency room. She had heard of The Great Mutilatto, but had never been to a show. She recognized him from his facial scars, which were prominent even in the grainy carnival posters. She introduced herself and when she asked about his show, Bolo offered her free tickets to the next performance. He was waiting in the emergency room because one of his piercings had become infected and had to be drained, and before he left with the nurse, he asked Dona to have lunch with him.

They ate hamburgers together and talked about his act.

"But that's enough about me," he told her. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

“Well, for starters, what were you doing in the ER?”

“This is embarrassing,” she said. “I was giving plasma and I fainted.”

“Why is that embarrassing? It must happen to lots of people.”

“It’s never happened to me before.”

“You do this a lot?”

“Yes. And believe me, giving plasma is no big deal.”

Dona explained that the hospital paid good money for plasma. She told Bolo that she also sold other things. She smiled shyly over a cup of coffee and confessed, “I only have one kidney.”

“What happened to your other kidney?”

“Well.” She hesitated. “I sold it.”

“That’s not so bad. Maybe you really helped someone.”

Dona had helped many people. She had also sold part of her liver. Sometimes, she donated ova to parents who couldn’t conceive, and once had even been a surrogate mother. In the next month, she planned to have bone marrow extracted to sell to cancer patients. It was only a part-time job. Most days, she worked in a used bookstore that offered flexible schedules to its employees.

“Dona?”

“Yes?”

“I think I’m in love with you.”

Two weeks later, they were married.

After the story, Bolo's eyes close. He is ready to fall asleep and dream of Dona. Stella decides to let him rest; she can always feed him later. Bobby slips out of bed and follows her into the kitchen to wait for his breakfast. Bolo's foot is under the table, and every now and then, Bobby strokes it with one of his own feet. He talks to Stella while she cooks his eggs.

"Want to see what Dad taught me to do?" She doesn't, particularly, but she lets him show her anyway. Bobby sits on the floor, lifts his right leg, and places it behind his head. He does the same thing to his left leg. Slowly, he lifts himself up on his hands and walks across the floor on them. "I've been practicing. I can even go up stairs like this."

Stella wishes Bolo would not teach Bobby these tricks. There is an old book beside his bed with black and white photos of circus freaks. He and Bobby flip through it together and plan the act Bobby will have someday. Bolo may not be able to get out of bed anymore, but he does what he can to ensure a solid future for his son. He wants Bobby to follow in his footsteps.

Bobby's first performances were for kindergarten show-and-tell. He is currently working on a new routine for the fifth grade talent show. He never wins anything, and often makes the other children cry, but Bolo insists the exposure is good for his career. He plans to teach Bobby the art of self-mutilation when he is old enough. While he eats scrambled eggs, Bobby tells Stella that he wants to have his own one-man act. He insists, "I'll be the greatest Mutilatto in the world." Stella tells him to stop talking and finish his eggs.

After breakfast, Stella tries to sleep. She is thinking about Bobby. Once, her parents had hoped that she would grow up to be "Mutilatta," a female copy of her father.

When Bobby was born, they took no chances that he would defy them, as Stella had. Determined not to harbor another failure in their midst, Bolo and Dona had flexed and stretched Bobby's infant limbs even as he lay in his crib. As soon as he could walk on his own, they enrolled him in gymnastics classes. Stella, who started her career as Stiletto Hone too late in life to satisfy her parents, realizes that she can never be the virtuoso performer that her father was, or that Bobby will be. Performance is in their blood, but it may not be in hers.

Often, Stella meets with Bobby's teachers to discuss his behavior. They complain about him. They tell her, "he won't sit properly at his desk. He distracts the other children." His grades are below-average, and his conduct reports are all the same: "Bobby must try harder to fit in with the other children." These reports are stacked on Bolo's bedside table, where he can look at them whenever he wants. Stella's report cards—straight A's on all of them and commendations for good conduct—are in the hall closet.

In a way, Stella is glad that her mother is dead. With Bolo bed-ridden, she has more influence than ever over her brother. She often thinks that the nicest thing Bolo could do for his children would be to die before he becomes a major financial liability. Stella is certain that his health will not last forever, and they cannot afford medical care for very long. Her parents have made a lot of money, but there are no health insurance policies and Stella knows, from her mother's illness, how costly a slow death can be.

Dona, who had been sickly for years, was diagnosed with lung cancer when Stella was sixteen. Bolo was heartbroken. He stopped working and sat all day by her hospital

bed talking to her, singing to her, and telling the old story of their first date. Out in the hall, the doctor spoke to Stella.

“Your mother is very ill,” he said. “Normally, we would suggest removing the infected part of her lung.” He looked at the nurse and they nodded together. Of course, Stella understood the problem immediately. Removing the cancer-riddled lung would certainly kill her mother; it was the only one she had.

“We can’t find any record of previous surgeries on your mother, and she insists she hasn’t had any,” the doctor said. Stella just shrugged her shoulders. She could not tell him that her mother had sold her lung two years before to buy, among other things, a new bedroom suite. In the end, Dona refused to stay at the hospital. Her family took her home so she could die on her expensive new Sealy Posture-pedic mattress in its shiny solid oak bedframe.

Bolo fell apart. He would not work. He grew pale and his scars lost their stark contrast. Stella stayed home. She listened to Bolo talk about Dona, telling stories of their life together on the road, before Stella and Bobby were born. “Your mother used to sit in the bleachers every night. She never missed one of my acts. She always had a bag with her full of antiseptic and gauze. She was always worried that I would get an infection.” Stella held his hand and pretended she could not see him crying. Bobby, who had always been able to make Bolo laugh, could not distract his father. He even learned how to walk on his elbows, something his father had tried to teach him months before. Bolo said only, “Your mother would have been so proud,” and Stella had to take Bobby by the hand and lead him away.

After a month, Stella thought Bolo was getting better. She found him leafing through *Ripley's Believe it or Not* books, and looking at *The Guinness Book of World Records*. He had stopped talking about Dona; in fact, he rarely talked at all. In the past, this had always been a sign that he was working on something big. And then one morning, while Stella was pouring bowls of cereal for all of them, Bolo announced that he was packing up the old van. He was going to join the freak show. He showed his children the ads he had printed out, bright yellow fliers with his portrait done in black ink: "See the Great Mutilatto in his most dangerous performance yet!"

One week later, on a Saturday night, Stella and Bobby sat in the bleachers waiting for their father to make his entrance. They could hear the barker outside: "Come one, come all to see the Great Mutilatto. You won't believe your eyes." They had no idea what their father was planning. He had disappeared into a tent since they had rejoined the show and, although Stella saw people going in and out, no one would tell her what Bolo was up to. She stayed in the van with her brother, who kept saying, "I'll bet Dad is planning something really cool."

Stella bit her nails while she waited and tried to make Bobby sit still. And then, the lights were dimmed except for a single spotlight. There he was, the Great Mutilatto, being lowered to the center of the tent, the hooks in his shoulder skin straining at the extra weight he had put on since Dona became ill. Stella, convinced that his flesh would rip free from the hooks, could not watch. Bobby, excited, whispered, "That's my Dad," to all the people seated near him.

Bolo, feet on the floor at last, freed himself from the hooks and sat on a raised platform. The audience watched while he lifted his razor and carved something into his

left foot. Video cameras zoomed in and images of the Great Mutilatto, larger than life, appeared on monitors at the sides of the tent. He was writing his name on his skin, working slowly, pressing down hard to form stark cursive letters—no amateur printing for him. He sat there working silently, oblivious as people in the audience began shifting around in the bleachers, curious at first, and then bored. There were coughs and sniffs, and then the whispering started. “Is this it?” someone asked, and then a man in the back row began to boo.

Stella sat frozen on the bleachers until her father finished signing his name and finally looked up. He stretched his legs out in front of him, and when he threw the razor to the floor, she noticed for the first time how badly his hands were shaking. Over the booing, he called out: “The Great Mutilatto is ready.” At his signal, an assistant came forward from the shadows with an ax in his hands.

In the sudden silence, Bolo put his hands together in a prayer position and closed his eyes. A master performer, he allowed the tension to build until the audience decided he could not possibly be serious and the whispering started once again. Finally, Bolo bowed his head. He did not look up, nor did he flinch, when the assistant brought the ax down on his ankle in a practiced stroke, severing Bolo’s foot in one swing.

Other performances went much more smoothly. Once people realized what he was doing, his show sold out every night. Fans lined up outside his tent afterwards for the chance to bid on keepsakes from his show—ten carefully preserved fingers sold individually, two ears made into keychains, choice bits of skin with artistic scarring, even his teeth were auctioned off one by one. The larger parts were autographed by the great man himself. Bolo was hurt that Stella had stopped attending his performances and asked

why she could not be more like Bobby, who came faithfully every night. She would not answer him, and she would not be persuaded. She simply could not sit in the audience each night, as her mother had done in the past. She waited until Bobby came home afterwards to tell her about the act, unable to fall asleep until he assured her that this night, at least, had not ended in Bolo's death.

It takes Stella a long time to fall asleep. She has vivid dreams and it is in these moments that her concern for Bolo gives way to her subconscious. In her dreams, she sees him die in a hundred different ways.

It is so easy to do this. He is sleeping and he cannot hear me unless I take the cotton out of his earholes. I can stand right here next to his bed and watch him sleep. I don't have to do anything. There is a pillow on the floor—he must have knocked it off the bed—and I will pick it up and put it back. Quiet. I do want to wake him. He moved. Is he waking up? No. He's smiling. Maybe he's dreaming about Mom.

I think it's okay if I put the pillow back now, just right there next to him. I don't have to put it over his face. But what if I do? He can't yell with a pillow on his face. He can't push my hands away. I could just put it here on his mouth and press down a little.

It's so quiet. He looks like he's sleeping. I will put the pillow down next to him, like I was going to. And then I will go to bed. But first, I will kiss him on the cheek and feel the raised patterns of scars under my lips.

Stella wakes up slowly. It is barely noon, way too early for her to be up, but she feels someone watching her. It's Bobby. His back is to her, and his head peers out from between his legs. To him, she looks upside-down.

"Bobby. What do you want?"

"Get up Stella. You didn't give Dad any breakfast and he says he's hungry."

Stella must get out of bed. She wonders what these helpless Hone men would do if she weren't there to feed them and take care of them anymore. She shoos Bobby away so she can dress and throws Bolo's foot after him when he forgets to take it with him.

She wanders into the kitchen, wondering what to make for lunch. There is some leftover tuna salad, but if she feeds it to Bolo, he will smell of fish and she will have to bathe him. She settles on hamburgers and looks away when Bobby pours ketchup on his. Stella drinks only coffee at this hour. She sits next to Bobby while he eats and puts her head in her hands. She is dizzy and has a headache from the alcohol and blood loss of the night before. There is a cut on her thigh—the one made by her best customer—that is still seeping blood through the thick cotton gauze.

She gets up for more coffee and trips over the foot Bobby has left on the floor. She yells, "Bobby. Go play outside or something. And take that damn foot with you." She would like to take it away from him and stuff it in the bottom of the trash barrel, but she cannot bring herself to do it.

She hears Bolo calling from the next room. "*Ewwa*." He wants his lunch. Then he will want her to read to him. Stella pours more coffee from the pot. As she stirs in the milk and sugar, she watches her hands moving. Her best customer often begs her to let

him cut off one of her fingers. Stella wonders if she would miss it—just one little finger from her left hand. It is such a small thing.

It is such a big thing.

She mashes two hamburgers in a little bowl and adds an egg to soften them. She walks into her father's room and stands in the doorway, watching him. Bolo is sitting up, propped on his pillows, and he faces her, happy to see her at last. She notices, not for the first time, the faded scars on his face. The black is leaching out of them and the scars themselves are no longer raised up. They too seem to be leaching out of his skin. Her own scars are still new, still red, still raw and healing. As she lifts a spoon to Bolo's mouth, she can feel his eyes on her, on her arms, on the bandages she added the night before.

It is hot in the room, and the sweat on her body stings her open cuts. The pain is comforting. It is immediate and it can be dealt with. She will take a shower after her father has eaten and wash it away. For now, she feeds her father and looks out of the window at Bobby practicing his contortions in the yard. Bolo's foot lies in a shady spot nearby. Bobby has drawn a small crowd of neighborhood children and although Stella can see their lips moving, she cannot hear what they are saying. She hopes, for his sake, that their words are kind.

3. Masking

Today is Sunday. The nurse doesn't come on weekends and Angie called earlier to say she wouldn't be by. I am sitting alone at the kitchen table drinking coffee and smoking cigarette after cigarette until the air is blue with it. When I first came home, it was late April and I could at least open the window, but it's February now. It's drafty in the kitchen. I would move to another room but I like to look outside, and the light is better for doing crossword puzzles. If I ever forgot how long I've been here, I could measure time in stacks of pages taken from the daily paper, folded twice to make them easier to handle. I always mean to recycle them, but I never get around to it.

The kitchen is the best room because it gets the most sun. The living room is always dark. The windows are small and set high into the walls, and there is no overhead light. It's nice enough at night when it's lit by table lamps, but it's crowded with furniture and there are too many shadows. There are curio cabinets and shelves full of figurines and dried flower arrangements, and even sitting on the sofa with my back to it all, I can feel the years of dusty accumulation looming over me. It's too easy to imagine the china cabinet inching towards me by degrees, sneaking up with its weight of dishes and silverware, intent on crushing me. I always want to turn around and make sure all the furniture is still safely pushed against the walls.

I grew up here and even as a kid the house felt cramped. It bothers me more now, especially when I try to maneuver my mother's wheelchair into the kitchen for meals, or into the living room to watch TV. She complained when I tried to move things around to clear a path for her, and since the wheelchair eliminates the danger of falls, I decided not to argue with her. "You can wait until after I'm dead to start throwing my things out," she told me. "If you change it too much, I might not recognize my own house." There is some truth to that, and with the exception of adding guard rails to her bed and a ramp up to the front porch, I haven't changed anything.

I make lunch for Mom, and hold my breath when I bring it into her room. The air smells of baby powder, urine, and antiseptic—smells that won't go away no matter how many candles I burn or room deodorizers I spray. If I leave the door open, the smell spreads more thickly into the rest of the house. The door is always closed, but unlatched, so I can push it open with my foot when my hands are full. Sometimes, when I'm out running errands or grocery shopping, I think the smell is in my clothes and hair. I carry with me at all times the peculiar smell that has replaced my memories of Chanel perfume with the reek of old age, of deterioration rather than quiet fading, of rot and decay and drawn out death.

I set Mom's lunch tray on her bedtable, and when I say hello to her, she mutters something I do not catch. "I've got your lunch, Mom. Let's get you into your chair so you can eat before it gets cold." I slide one hand under her back. "Try to put your arms around my neck." Her fingers moving on the covers, but her arms are still. She used to be able to help me, grasping my neck for balance and standing on her own, but she is rarely able to do that now. I put an arm under her knees, lifting and sliding her into the wheelchair. I

measure her weight loss in terms of how long it used to take me to do this. Seated now, Mom slumps over and I have to use restraining belts to help her sit upright.

“I hope you’re in the mood for soup.”

She does not answer, and her eyes are closed. I put the spoon to her mouth, napkin underneath to catch drips, even though she is wearing a bib. When she feels the spoon on her lips, she turns her head away.

“Okay, you’re not in the mood. Do you like grilled cheese?” She nods, her eyes still closed, and opens her mouth. She eats only half and sips a glass of juice.

“Do you feel like you can swallow some pills, Mom?” When she doesn’t respond, I ask again. “Why don’t you try to take one and then we’ll see about the rest, okay?” She nods slowly and accepts a single capsule from my hand, washing it down with the rest of her juice. When I offer her another one, she turns her head away again. If she will not take them now, I’ll have to crush them up later and hide them in another glass of juice or a can of Ensure.

I ask her if she wants to watch television, and when there is no response, I get my crossword puzzle from the kitchen and begin filling it in, reading the clues out loud. There is no telling if she wants me to talk to her, or even to sit with her. Her face gives nothing away. Her doctor explained that it’s a common symptom of Parkinson’s Disease, this frozen expression. He called it “masking.” When Mom cannot, or will not, tell me how she feels, I can only make guesses.

“Okay, two down, Mom. Italian wine center. Begins with ‘A.’ Asti?” I fill it in. “Matinee blank—matinee idol, right?” I have gotten pretty good at these, even the ones

from the Sunday paper. After a while, you start to recognize clues. The only ones that really trip me up anymore are the plays-on-words.

“21 across. Altar words. What does that mean? Amen, maybe?”

“I do.” I look up. Mom’s eyes are open and she’s looking at me.

“What did you say?”

“It’s ‘I do.’ It said altar words, not word.”

“Well, you were always better at these than I was.”

I wonder about the moments when she is almost herself again. She moves from near-catatonia to total alertness with lightning speed. She was unresponsive for two weeks once; she wouldn’t open her eyes, she wouldn’t eat. I took her to the emergency room and they hooked her up to an IV. I thought, this is it, and I was thinking about calling my old job to see if they would take me back. Mom woke up in the emergency room and knew exactly where she was and who I was. The doctor said it was dehydration that made her stay like that for so long. Still, I sometimes imagine her lurking there behind closed eyes, playing possum, and watching my reactions through cracked eyelids.

After I help Mom back into bed, I have to figure out what to do with the afternoon. Weekends are especially hard when Angie can’t come by. I can’t leave the house, and it’s hard to find a way to kill the expanses of time between meals. In the evenings, after Mom has her dinner, I usually fix my own. I eat it in front of the television, and sit there until I feel dull and tired enough to go to sleep. Sometimes it takes hours of flipping channels, until my eyes are dried out and my vision is blurry, for me to even feel like lying down. I am used to being more active—to working a full day, exercising at the gym, eating dinner with friends. Taking care of Mom is draining in a

different way. It doesn't take much physical effort, but it does take away my motivation. I could exercise while she sleeps, but it's hard to get excited about workout videos with all the knick-knacks falling off the shelves when I do jumping jacks.

I have been meaning to go through some of our old things, to figure out what is worth saving and what can be thrown away. Mom has accumulated years of stuff that she stored in my old bedroom. I tried sleeping in there when I first moved back home, but it was impossible. It has become a kind of giant closet for old toys, photo albums, Christmas decorations, clothes that my mother will never wear again. In the midst of it all is a twin bed with an aging, saggy mattress. I almost suffocated in there, buried under huge piles of the past. I prefer to sleep on the sofa in the living room, exposed and vulnerable to the things that loom in the dark, with only a knitted afghan to protect me from the threat of crushing furniture.

I really do not want to clean out my old room, but there isn't much else to do. I can't take another nap, or drink another cup of coffee. I save the crosswords for nighttime, something to look forward to at the end of the day. If I don't start cleaning out that room, I will end up sitting in the kitchen all day, staring out the window, watching dead leaves blow around in the yard. At the very least I can throw away some of the stacks of old magazines that are piled in the corners, the ones Mom always said would be worth money someday.

I take some trash bags with me and sit down on the floor. I find a shoebox under the bed that is full of ticket stubs and programs from movies and plays. Another box is full of buttons. These go into a trash bag. For some reason, she has stored our photo albums under the bed, which explains why I haven't been able to find them. I used to

love to sit with these when I was younger and flip through the pictures of my much younger mother, and a much younger me. It always fascinated me that I could look at a picture of myself playing at the park, or eating cake at a birthday party, and have no memory of being there or doing those things.

Propping my back up against the bed, I rest one of the albums on my legs and leaf through it. There's a picture of Mom pregnant with me, my father standing beside her. It represents another blank spot for me. I can't remember him, and it's eerie to see pictures of a total stranger holding me, a stranger who looks like me.

There are other pictures—me at four, blowing out birthday candles. Me feeding the ducks at the park, my feet up on a bench, flinging the bread at them to ward them off. I have a very clear memory of being terrified that the ducks would peck me to death if I let them get too close.

My favorite one is a photo taken at the zoo when I was five years old. There was a place where you could pay to ride an elephant and have your picture taken. I begged and begged Mom to get up there with me, and there we are, balanced on a blanket laid across its back. I am in front, and she is behind me, with her arms around my waist. I am smiling, but she is not. Her face is twisted from the elephant's strong odor and her hair has gone frizzy in the summer heat. I realize two things for the first time. One is that the elephant picture is the only one we have of both of us. The other is that in all of the photographs taken of her, my mother is never smiling.

I have been in this room for two hours. Mom might be awake, and I should have checked on her an hour ago. I get up to leave, my knees stiff and sore from sitting Indian-

style on the floor, and my left foot has fallen asleep. I take the albums with me when I leave the room.

Today, my mother will not let me give her a bath. I filled the tub and set out towels. The water gets cold while we argue.

“I’m not getting in there. I know what you’re up to.”

“I’m not up to anything, Mom. I just thought you might like a bath.”

“I’ll get in there and you’ll drown me.”

I try pulling off her nightgown but she fights me. Her arms go rigid against her sides, and she grips the arms of her wheelchair. I kneel to take off her slippers instead and she kicks me in the shoulder. I catch hold of her ankle and hold it still, willing my fingers not to bite too deeply into her skin, trying not to shove her foot back into place on the footrest.

“Fine, Mom. I’ll ask Gina to give you a sponge bath.”

“You want to drown me. You hate me.”

“Look, Mom, see? We’re going into the living room. You can watch TV until Gina gets here.” I park her chair next to the sofa and leave her sitting there, while I go out on the porch. I am grateful that it’s one of Gina’s days. She’s a nurse’s aide and she comes three times a week to check on Mom. She stays for two hours, just long enough for me to run errands if I need to. It’s all the Social Security and Medicare will pay for. We can’t afford a nursing home, or a live-in nurse. My only other option was to put her in the state hospital. I visited it back in April, and I can’t do it. Essentially, it’s just cold

storage—a place to send bodies before burial. I could never do that to my mother. I can't bury her alive.

At 10:00, Gina arrives, and I go grocery shopping. We really don't need anything, but I can always pick up some Ensure for Mom, and maybe a few Lean Cuisine meals. I cooked a lot for the first few months, making soups and stews from homemade stock and baking cakes and pies, but the novelty has worn off. I walk slowly down every aisle, looking at the packed shelves, the colorful labels of gourmet foods I will never need. I think about buying cookies to share with Angie when she comes over tomorrow. She has lived down the street from Mom for twelve years and is nice enough to come over every other day or so to sit with her. Sometimes, she drinks coffee with me, bumming cigarettes because her husband will not let her buy them. She talks to me about her own mother, who died of cancer last year. "I know what you must be feeling," she says. "When my mother was sick, I was in shock. It was the first time it ever occurred to me that she might not always be there." I don't know how to tell her any different, to say to her that I faced up to that fact months ago—that I'm over-prepared for it to happen, and that at this point it would be a relief. Angie, who refused to sign a do-not-resuscitate order, who said to me at the funeral, "I wish she had lived longer," would not understand.

When I get home, I find Gina sitting with my mother in the living room. "We were just watching the soaps," she tells me. I know I am running a few minutes late and I apologize. I hate to be responsible for her being late at her next patient's house. The times that she has been late coming here, I have watched out the window for her, pacing up and down with the cordless phone in my hand, and calling social services to get a report.

Once, when she called to say she would not be there, I put my head down on the table and cried.

“I’m thirsty,” my mother says, and Gina picks up a paper cup of water from the table and hands it to her. It is less than half full. “Can you do this yourself?” she asks, and Mom stretches her hand for it, concentrating on her grip, her fingers bending the flimsy paper inward. She lifts it slowly to her mouth with shaky hands. When we are alone, although I know I shouldn’t, I do it for her. I can’t stand to watch her slow, painful struggle over a single sip of water.

Mom makes several low noises, chuffing sounds that come from deep in her throat. “What is it?” I ask, and when she does not answer, I turn to Gina. She rubs Mom’s back and asks, “Are you okay?” Mom nods that she is, and after a minute the sounds stop.

“It must have gone down the wrong pipe,” Gina says.

I walk her out onto the porch when she is ready to leave. “You know, you need to watch her any time she has something to drink,” she tells me. “She has some difficulty swallowing, and you don’t want her to choke, or to aspirate the fluid into her lungs.”

I have heard this before. Both the doctor and Gina have warned me that Mom’s diaphragm may weaken, that she may not be able to cough and clear her lungs. I wonder if Gina is implying that I am too careless. “Her doctor explained everything to me already. I always watch when she eats or drinks. I watch her all the time,” I tell her.

“Did he tell you to get Thick-N for her?”

“I don’t know. He may have.”

“You should pick some up. You put it in water or juice to thicken it so it’s harder to aspirate. It’s a little like cornstarch. Just remember never to give her anything when she’s lying down.”

“Next time I talk to her doctor, I’ll ask him about it.” Gina smiles at me and touches my shoulder when she leaves. She must be used to people not taking her advice, relying instead on what their doctors say. I feel I have been rude and I’m embarrassed, but it’s too late to apologize. She is already pulling out of the driveway.

My mother is slumped in her wheelchair and I stand behind her for a few minutes, watching. It’s difficult to tell if she’s asleep, if she just leaned too far over and can’t pull herself back up, or if she’s dead. After a minute, I see her fingers twitching. Sometimes, when I find her like this, sitting completely unguarded in her chair, I imagine tiptoeing up to her and slipping my hands around her throat, or maybe the cord from her bathrobe, and choking her. I see her head falling backwards, her eyes open, staring, seeing me before she dies. Even in my imagination, I find this absolutely horrifying. Why can’t she die with her eyes shut?

Mom looks up when I approach her chair. I release the brake and get ready to wheel her back into her room, but she says, “I don’t want to go back.” I tell her she looks tired, that she should lie down, and she insists she doesn’t want to. I was looking forward to making a fresh pot of coffee, reading the paper, doing the crossword. If she sits in the kitchen with me, even if she’s quiet, it will make me uncomfortable. I will feel that I have to entertain her, to at least talk to her. Instead, I sit on the sofa while Mom watches television, and dozes on and off, waking every time I make a move to return her to her room. Every now and then, she says things. Most do not make sense. “Do you see those

people sitting over there?” she asks. I look at the television, but that’s not what she means. She’s pointing into the corner. She asks me again if I see them, and when I tell her I don’t, she says, “I think they’re waiting for me.” She isn’t especially agitated by this, though sometimes she gets upset when she imagines there are people in the room staring at her. “I want to go home,” she tells me sometime later. I can only imagine what she means.

I wake up late at night to the sound of screaming. Everything is black, and someone is shrieking for help. I stand up, banging my shins on the coffee table, and fall to my knees. The sounds are coming from different directions, one at the level of my ear and the other farther off. It’s my mother, screaming out of the baby monitor for help. I run into her room and flip the light on. She is half out of bed, her torso caught on the guard rail we put up so she wouldn’t tumble out by accident. When I get near, she grabs my hand, grinding my fingers together, and begs me to help her.

“Please, please get them off me. Get them off me.”

“Mom, what is it?”

“Please. The snakes. The snakes.”

“What snakes?”

“Please. Please! Get them off me.” Her eyes are huge, the pupils wide, and I can smell fresh urine. I take a step back, but she holds onto my hand.

“Mom, let go. You’re crushing me.” She doesn’t hear me.

“Please. They’re on my feet.” I look at her feet, which are covered only by blankets. I pull the covers aside to show her that everything is fine. She is trying to pull

her feet up, but she cannot move them, and finally she gives up, exhausted. She cries weakly, silently, her hold on me finally loosening.

“Please,” she says again.

“Mom, there are no snakes in this bed. Look. There’s nothing there.”

“They are. They’re on my feet.”

I hold her hand, trying to calm her, trying to calm myself. I sit next to her to examine my knees. One of them is bleeding. “Look what I did to my leg, Mom. You scared me to death.” She is still crying.

“Please,” she whispers, and I pat her hand.

I tell Angie about it when she comes by the next morning, and she asks me how I handled it.

“There was nothing I could do. I just stayed with her. I was up all night.”

“Oh, honey,” Angie says, “you need to humor her is all. If she says there are snakes, then just tell her you see them.”

“What good will that do?”

“It happened before when I was sitting with her. It was no big deal. I just took a pillowcase and she pointed where they were, and I picked them all up and took them outside. She was fine afterwards.”

I can’t imagine playing this kind of game with my mother. One crazy person in the house is enough. I just tell Angie, “That’s pretty funny,” and she gives me a strange look and goes to say hello to my mother.

I decide to take a shower, something I often do when Angie is here, because I will not have to worry about hearing the baby monitor over the sound of the water. Also, it’s

easier on me when I have company. I have a phobia about the shower drain from when I was a kid. I was always afraid that something would crawl out of it or, even worse, reach out of it, a clawed hand grasping for my ankles. I know it's stupid, but I feel better about showering when Angie is here. When I turn the water on, the pipes shriek. The plumbing is old, and I can usually tune out the noise. I'm standing under the shower spray with my eyes closed when I realize that it sounds like a chorus of people screaming. I open my eyes again, wash my hair quickly, and get the hell out of there.

This place is turning into a house of horrors. I walked into the kitchen a few weeks ago and noticed roaches on the floor. No matter how much I mop with bleach water, I still find them every night. The linoleum is old and it's peeling up at the edges, and I remember reading somewhere that roaches can eat the dried glue under the flooring. When I walk in there now, I hear the linoleum crackling underfoot when I step on the loose places. I can't help but wonder if it's old floor or roaches I am crushing. I know that they won't come out in the day, but it makes sitting in the kitchen unpleasant. I can feel the roaches waiting behind the walls and under the floors, inside the cabinets, and behind the vents, until it is dark and they feel safe enough to come out.

I'm having trouble sleeping. Every time I start to doze off, I think I hear my mother calling me. Sometimes I get halfway to her room before I realize I'm only imagining things. Yesterday, I fell asleep sitting up in the kitchen, and when I woke up Mom really was calling. She had a muscle cramp in her leg, a charley horse, and it was several minutes before I figured out why she was upset. She couldn't explain, and I kept asking, "Does your stomach hurt? Do you need me to take you to the bathroom? Is it your back?" I was ready to call an ambulance when she finally said, "my leg." I pulled it

straight for her and pushed my hand against her foot, bending it toward her, trying to stretch out her calf muscle. I kept thinking about the time I accidentally ran over a cat. Its back legs were crushed, and it twisted and writhed on the sidewalk before it finally died of fright.

This morning, when I take Mom her breakfast, she will not open her eyes or speak to me. I worry because she will not eat or drink and she gets dehydrated so quickly. I am tired of sitting with her in the emergency room, tired of staring at her while she lies there motionless, knowing I cannot leave her because she will be terrified if she wakes up in a strange place and no one is there to comfort her. Gina will be here in an hour and maybe she can tell me what to do. I cannot sit here with Mom when she is like this. After a while, I start wanting to grab her by the shoulders and shake her, forcing her to wake up. From what I've been told, she's not unconscious, she's not in a coma, she's not sleeping, she's not catatonic. If there is no real reason for her to be this way, then I don't know why she can't just wake up and eat, and take her medicine, and drink something so that I will not have to think about it anymore. I'm not worried that she will die. I am just tired of waiting to see what will happen.

Gina says Mom is physically fine. "I think she just turns off, like you turn off a switch. She'll probably come out of it, but you may want to give her doctor a call." I am sick to death of the doctor. I am sick of hearing, "we'll have to wait and see" and "just be patient." If I hear it one more time, I will go insane. Angie said it to me yesterday—"I think it's great that you're so patient with your mother." This was while I was giving Mom her lunch. She kept pushing my hand away, insisting that I had poisoned the mashed potatoes. She looked at Angie and me and said, "I know you're both against me.

You're trying to kill me." Angie thinks I was so patient, but it's lucky she was there.

What I really wanted to do, instead of talking softly to my mother and holding her hand, was to force her head down into the plate and hold it there until she quit fighting me.

I am sitting in her room with a crossword puzzle, but I can't seem to get any of the clues. I'm really just keeping watch. If Mom does not wake up soon, I will have to take her to the hospital. I look up from the puzzle to find Mom looking at me. "Hi, Mom. It's nice to see you."

"Who are you?" she asks.

"Mom, it's me. It's Janey."

"I don't know you." When I get near the bed, she tries to move away. "Don't come near me. I don't know you." Even in fright, her face is sagging, expressionless, like a latex Halloween mask that doesn't quite fit.

She has banished me from her room. All that's left for me is to sit on the couch in the living room, checking over my shoulder all the time to make sure there are no china cabinets or roaches sneaking up on me, that the screaming people in the shower have not gotten out. I pick up the telephone, wanting to talk to someone, and realize that there is absolutely no one I can call. I lie down on the sofa, pulling the afghan over my head, and stay there, afraid to move or make a sound.

In the morning, Mom knows who I am. She lets me give her breakfast, and eats scrambled eggs and grits without complaint, never once turning her head away. Angie comes over, and Mom asks her, "Have you met my daughter yet? She came home for

Christmas.” Neither one of us contradicts her. When I leave the room to take a shower, I tell Angie, “Merry Christmas.”

“That’s kind of in poor taste, don’t you think?” Angie asks me, killing my smile before it even reaches my face.

The lightbulb over the bathroom sink burns out when I flip the switch, and I replace it with one of the 100-watt bulbs I bought for the kitchen. Immediately, I wish I hadn’t. It’s one thing to have a bright light in the kitchen, where it might do some good with the roaches, but in here, all it does is show my reflection, starkly drawn in the bathroom mirror. My frizzy hair and darkly circled eyes are ugly, but not unexpected. When I reach up to touch my puffy face, I am surprised by my hands. The skin is dry and flaky, and it’s shiny where it stretches over my knuckles. It’s drawn so tightly that my veins bulge out, deep blue and pulsing. My nails are brittle and peeling and my fingers are stained with nicotine. I am amazed by how much they look like my mother’s hands, as if I have contracted old age like a contact disease.

I show them to Angie when I get out of the shower. She tells me to buy a good lotion, to wear rubber gloves when I bathe my mother or wash dishes. I look at her hand holding the cigarette I gave her, and it looks like she just had a manicure. She can talk about hand lotion all she wants. I know that the problem is internal. I hold my forearm up to my face and smell it. Even though I have just had a shower, it smells of baby powder, urine, antiseptic.

After Angie leaves, I sit in Mom’s room for the rest of the day. I pull my chair close to her bed and talk to her about the pictures in our photo albums. Her eyesight is too blurred to really see them, but she nods as I describe each one.

“Here’s one of you on the beach when you were a kid. You were kind of chubby back then.”

“I was not,” she says.

“Well, it’s not like you’re chubby anymore. Don’t be so defensive.”

When we get to the second album, I ask her if she remembers the elephant. She’s quiet and I think she has forgotten, but after a minute, she says, “You peed your pants.”

“I did not.”

“You did. You didn’t want to go. You were scared. Like you were scared of the ducks.”

It shakes me a little that her memory of the elephant ride might be clearer than mine. It reminds me, too, that she is still in there, buried somewhere in her ruined body, capable of surfacing at any time. I describe more pictures to her, talking for another hour before I realize that she has fallen asleep.

I am inspired to make a decent dinner, hopeful that Mom will be able to eat it. I still have beef stew in the freezer, frozen from when I was on my cooking kick. I thaw it out, and bake soft rolls to go with it. She puts her arms weakly around my neck, though I don’t need her help to lift her anymore. She weighs less than ninety pounds. I rest the tray on the arms of her wheelchair, tie a clean bib around her neck, and am gratified that she opens her mouth when I raise the soup spoon. She eats all of her dinner roll, and half of the stew.

She nods when I ask if she wants to watch TV, and we sit in the living room together until I notice her dozing off. I put her in a nightgown and get her back into bed. I am used to having the living room to myself, and now that she has been here with me, it

feels especially empty. It amazes me that one good day in all the bad makes up for so much. When Mom is cheerful, I forget everything else.

I am asleep on the couch when I hear my name. I feel trapped in sleep, groggy, and I can't clear my head. There is a dark shape in the corner of the room that is unfamiliar, and I am afraid to turn my head and look. It may be that there is something there, lurking behind the chair, and it called me from my sleep. The voice sounded so raspy, breathing the words more than saying them, not a human sound at all. I am fighting with myself because part of me knows that my mother is calling to me over the baby monitor, and another part of me, irrationally, has paralyzed my muscles. If I move from the couch, something will get me.

"Help." A single word over the monitor, and I am finally able to get up because my mother needs me. When I go into her room, she is staring up at the ceiling, eyes wide, hands pressed to her chest.

"Mom, what is it?"

"There's someone in my room."

"I don't see anyone." The room is empty, but it reminds me of my dream. It makes me nervous to think that we're having the same vision.

"He's crouched over there, next to that dresser." I walk over and show her that no one is there, but she tells me I scared him off and he ran away. There is no way I can prove there's no one in the house, unless I take her with me to look for him. She will not let me search the house on my own, so I stay in her room until I think she's asleep.

Just as I am leaving, she asks for a drink of water. I don't think to go into the kitchen and mix a glass of water and Thik-N. It's only a small drink, and it seems so unimportant. I fill a glass halfway, and hold her head up a little so she can swallow it. She takes three small sips, and then I hear the familiar low chuffing sounds in her throat.

"Mom, are you okay?" She does not respond, but her hands move a little on the blankets.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" She makes more noises in her throat, and I know she is choking. I am standing there, still holding my mother's head up, and she is choking. My first instinct is to pound her on the back, but of course it does not work. I don't know what else to do, and I hate the fact that I'm alone. This should happen with Gina here, or Angie.

I should call someone to help me, but I'll have to let go of my mother to do it. I have to lay her back on the pillow and slip my hand from beneath her head. I walk to the telephone and pick up the receiver, and instead of dialing, I stand there, mesmerized by her hands. They are twisting in the sheets, pulling at them weakly, and I notice again how much my hands look like hers.

I am watching my mother choke and I realize that I only have two options. I can call for help, or I can walk over to the bed and take one of her hands between my own and hope she knows I am there.

When I put down the receiver, I know I can't change my mind. I pick her right hand up and hold it, even though I can feel it moving, and I watch the fingers twitching against my palm. It takes several minutes for her hand to be still, and I don't let it go even then. I do not look at her face. I am afraid to. I am afraid that her eyes will be open.

I know I should call someone, but I can't move. I can feel the house pressing in around me, and I am afraid to let go of my mother's hand. What will happen when I do? Will her house finally turn on me? I picture roaches crawling out of the linoleum and tumbling from the cabinets, and the shadows cast by the furniture coming to life. I don't trust this house to let me escape unharmed. The safest thing to do would be to stay here until daylight, holding onto my mother's hand. I will wait to open the door to her room, because I do not know what will be waiting for me on the other side.

4. Vagina Dentata

I was just going to the store for cigarettes. It's not my fault that I have to pass Caroline's apartment to get there, and that I can't help but notice her lights are off. She hasn't got a car, so I can't tell if she is home or not. I wonder if she's napping on the sofa, or if she's out with someone else. I don't really care either way—all I really want is to buy cigarettes. But since I'm here, maybe I'll just go and listen and see if I can hear anyone moving around in there. She never has to know.

When I get up there, I realize that you can't hear anything from out in the hall. I should have known. Her door is too well made; it's soundproofed to block out the noise of neighbors going in and out. If I could open the door just a crack, I would be able to tell if she's home and leave without her knowing. I would never pick the lock—someone might see me and get the wrong idea—but the doorknob turns when I try it. I stick my head just inside, and I don't hear anything. From the living room, I can tell that no one is home.

I check the piles of junk scattered around the room. I don't know exactly what I expect to see. Maybe a man's shirt, or a letter from someone I don't know. There is nothing to cause suspicion, nothing but the usual accumulation of receipts, magazines, food wrappers, and clothes. I move a bunch of junk off of the couch so I can sit down. I

know she could come back at any time. She probably just ran out to buy a soda. But she might be on a date. She has been avoiding me, so there must be someone new. She's out with some guy right now, maybe having dinner, maybe sitting at the movies. Will she let him sleep with her? Will he understand, if she says no, that what she really needs is for someone to grab her by the throat and force her?

I need to see if Caroline is with someone else. If she is, I will have to let her know I know. I will wait here and hide, and if she takes him to the bedroom I will spring out and surprise her. And when she starts to cry and beg me to forgive her for cheating, I will advance on her until she is cornered. I will punch through her chest and grab her heart. I will rip it out of her with both hands and throw it on the floor and stomp on it and crush it. I will grind my heel in it and watch it burst. I want to punish her heart because she takes such pleasure in punishing mine. If she is with someone else, I will murder her along with her dirty, disgusting, cheating heart. But she must be alone, she has to be.

Caroline's waitressing apron is draped over the arm of the couch. I push my face into it, and it smells of grease and sweat and something sweet—maybe soap from wiping her hands on it to dry them. I lie down with the apron spread over my face. I think I fall asleep for a while, because the next thing I hear is footsteps in the hall. I know it is her. I stand up, looking for a place to hide. The couch is in the middle of the living room and offers no cover. I run for the bedroom and slide under her bed just as I hear her open the door. She is alone.

I listen to her jacket sliding off her shoulders, her keys hitting the coffee table, the television coming on. I hear her in the kitchen, a soda can hissing open. She is flipping channels. She does this obsessively, never staying on one station for more than a second

or two, before moving on to the next. Finally, she sighs, turns the TV off, and her legs move into view. She's in jeans and I want very much to peek out and see what else she's wearing, but I'm afraid to. The bed is narrow and any movement will attract attention.

Her legs disappear into the bathroom, and I hear water running, a toilet flushing. When she comes back, her legs are bare. When she gets into bed, the mattress sags only an inch from my face. Every time she moves, the bedframe sways from side to side and squeaks. The light stays on, so I know she is reading one of the novels she keeps by the bed. I imagine her up there, only inches from me, above me, on top of me. She is moving and the box springs are moving with her and squealing. This is what it would sound like to fuck her in that bed, starting out gently, slowly. I can hear her and I can smell her. I brought her apron with me from the living room and it's pressed against my face. I imagine her sitting propped up, one leg straight out under the blanket, the other, bent at the knee, uncovered. She moves again, and I can see it—I can see her legs straightening out, twisting, her thighs rubbing together every time she shifts. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the rich smell of her filthy apron.

It may be hours before she turns out her light, and I'm trapped here. It seems strange, but I am sort of comfortable. I even manage to doze a little, but mostly I think about Caroline. I can still remember everything about the day she broke up with me. We were sitting at an outdoor café. Even though it was spring, it seemed odd that birds were singing while she was breaking my heart. In the distance, you could hear someone mowing his lawn. "There's something wrong with me, Jack," she told me, and took my hand. "There's something wrong with me," she said again. "I don't want to go into it, but it's why we can't see each other anymore." We listened for a while to the steady throb of

the lawnmower and the scattered conversations of the people around us on the patio, and when I was finally able to look at her, she was crying.

We had been dating for a month when she told me we couldn't see each other, but I still see her every day. I got my coffee at the diner all the time, even before she started working there, and that's all I want from her now. She probably thinks I'm checking up on her, but it's not true. She expects it, of course. I am supposed to want to see her, even if she doesn't want to see me. She wants me to come by so she can make sure I haven't moved on. I could leave her alone, I suppose, and stop giving her the satisfaction, but I'm not going to change my routine just because we broke up. But maybe, just maybe, if I keep going, I'll finally get to the bottom of things. Maybe one day she'll tell me why she dumped me, and what it is that's wrong with her.

It's not that I want her back. It's just that there is so much unfinished business between us. If she can't see me, if there is something wrong with her, I don't understand why she agreed to go out with me. She flirted with me for weeks before I understood that she liked me, and she said yes the first time I asked her on a date. We had a lot of dinners together, watched a couple of movies, drank a few bottles of wine. And then five weeks later, over a cup of coffee, she ended it. She wouldn't tell me why, she wouldn't even try to explain. In a month, I learned only a few things: she waits tables, she is a terrible housekeeper, and she would not go to bed with me.

Sometimes I think I hate her. She taunts me with her ambiguities. She must know that I'm wondering why she did it, and how much I want to ask. But when I see her, she never mentions it. She is always friendly. She smiles and asks me how I am as if there is nothing between us. Is she teasing me? Is she waiting for me to ask her? Am I supposed

to push and push until she caves in and answers me? Is that what she wants? Once, when she was pouring my coffee, I had an urge to leap the counter, to push her into the grill and lean over her, shouting into her face. “Caroline, you bitch, why don’t you just say it and stop holding your goddamn secret over my head.” She stood there calmly talking to me, and I had to fold my hands together to keep them from twitching.

It’s hard to think about, with her lying there just above me. It would be so easy to show myself, to spring up suddenly like a jack-in-the-box and yell, “Surprise.” It would be a pleasure if she tried to run. I am feeling claustrophobic under here, and I can’t understand why she won’t fall asleep. “Please turn off the light soon, Caroline,” I pray. “I can’t stand this. Please, you bitch, you whore, turn off the light and go to sleep. This is torture. I need to get out from under this bed.” I have to see her. I want to know what she looks like, lying there. I want to stand next to her while she sleeps and listen to her breathing. It is hours before she turns out the light. And when I am convinced she is soundly asleep, I creep out from under the bed.

She wears only a white T-shirt, and her blankets do not cover her completely. She is sleeping on her side close to the edge of the bed, facing away from me. Her hair is loose, and her mouth is open, breathing quietly, not quite snoring. She looks like a teenager, like someone who might be dreaming about her first kiss. This is better than anything I could have imagined. I tiptoe up to the bed, moving only an inch at a time, waiting between each step to see if she wakes up. I’m standing with my thighs pressed against the mattress, and it takes forever to pull down my zipper, one tooth at a time. When I unsnap my pants it sounds like a gunshot, but Caroline doesn’t hear. My penis is not fully erect, and I am able to lay it gently on her cheek without waking her. The

feeling of her soft skin against me is enough of a reward. I do not want to do anything disgusting. I do not want to degrade her, not now, when she looks so harmless. I stand still, with her soft hair falling around me, watching her eyelids flicker as she sleeps. I know I should leave before she senses me here, and after a few minutes, I take her apron with me and walk quietly out of the apartment.

Of course I realize that I think about her too much. But it's not my fault at all. I read a book of myths once, not Greek legends, but folklore and one of them described a woman with teeth in her vagina, who all of the men in the village were afraid of. I believe in the myth. Most of them have a lot of truth to them. Women use their vaginas to trap men and eat their cocks. I know it's not real, but it's true. There are women who take pleasure in diminishing us, making us less than men. That's what Caroline is trying to do to me. She won't date me, and she won't have sex with me, but she keeps me near her anyway. She denies me what is mine, and she thinks I won't take it from her.

Today, I'm back in the diner. It has been a good day for me, and I am able to sit here calmly while Caroline talks. I can't believe that I have been in her apartment, that we have been so intimate, and she doesn't know. She is telling me about the lunch shift. Her boss yelled at her when the orders backed up and customers complained. No one left her a good tip. There are tears in her eyes.

"It's all I need, Jack. All this hassle on top of everything else. As if there isn't enough wrong with me already." I close my eyes and count to ten. I have to put my hands under the counter again.

"What do you mean?" I finally ask.

“Nevermind,” she tells me.

Before I leave, she says, “You know, Jack, you should call me sometime soon. I think we need to talk.” I can’t believe it. She wants me to call her. I am excited because maybe this means she is finally ready to admit she made a mistake. And I am scared, because it means she may finally be ready to tell me why she broke up with me. Whatever her reasons are, whatever it is that’s wrong with her, it can’t possibly be enough to make up for what she has put me through. She owes me more than explanations.

When I get home, I brew a pot of coffee and try to figure out what she is up to. She said to call her. Maybe she wants me to ask her out. She could be ready to work through her problems so that we can be together again. Maybe she was just being polite, but I don’t know why she would have said it if she didn’t mean it. We have plenty of conversations where she just asks how I’m doing. Maybe she said it just to torture me, to see if she can string me along. When I finally break down and call her, she’ll laugh in my face. She’ll tell me it was all a joke. I notice that my hands are shaking again, and even though I haven’t smoked in two years, I need a cigarette.

At 7:30, I’m standing outside the door of her apartment. I smoked two cigarettes in the parking lot before I decided to come inside. I’ve got a bottle of wine. I thought about bringing flowers, but that’s not the kind of thing you do for your ex-girlfriend, is it? I wouldn’t want to send the wrong message. I am hoping that this is what she wants. She asked me to call her because she regrets breaking up with me, and she is ready to make up, explain the problem, and finally—finally—go to bed with me. It’s almost too much to

hope for. But I've brought this wine. I will either drink it to be romantic or I will drink it and be drunk. Either way, I'm prepared.

I knock and while I wait I imagine that Caroline opens the door and falls into my arms. "I'm so glad you're here, Jack," she whispers, and then I push her over to the couch and she lets me take her pants off. Instead, when the door opens, Caroline says, "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood. I thought I'd stop by to say hello."

"I wish you had called first," she tells me. "I just got home from work. I must look awful."

"You look fine," I say. Actually, she does look awful. She is wearing her waitress uniform, an apron still tied around her waist. Her forehead is shiny and there are dark circles under her eyes. I hold out the wine. "Look, I was going to go home and drink this later, but if you have time—"

She invites me in and tries to take the bottle. I hold onto it. I need something to hold onto. "Why don't you go change and I'll open this." I walk into the kitchen and have to plow through piles of old mail and dirty dishes before I can find the corkscrew. After I open the wine, I am too nervous to sit, so I pace around. Caroline is taking a long time to change. I imagine her staring into her closet, leaning against the door, not touching anything. I have seen her do it, standing there for minutes at a time before putting anything on. I know that she never latches her bedroom door, so it is easy to follow silently behind her and push it open an inch or two. As always, although her apartment is messy, her bedroom is painfully neat. I didn't get a chance to look at it yesterday. I had to hide in such a hurry, and after that it was dark. The bed is made, and there are vacuum

tracks on the carpeted floor. In here, her clothes are all neatly put away. It's a mystery, this sterile bedroom of hers. I want to burst in with my bottle of wine and break it over the bed, to christen it like a ship. I could christen her too, if she would let me, and smash the broken bottle over her head if she didn't. I'm not ready for that yet, so I just watch her as she undresses. Her back is to me, and I cannot see her breasts when she takes off her bra. I don't need to. I can imagine them perfectly. She walks over to the closet door and stands just inside it, holding onto a shirtsleeve, and leans over to rest her head against the doorframe.

It takes twenty-five minutes for Caroline to come out of her room. She is dressed in jeans and a sweater. Her face is washed and there is no makeup. Her brown hair is pulled back in a limp ponytail, the way she wears it at work, and when she passes, it wafts greasy diner smells at me. When we were dating, I used to want to dress her up and take her to fancy places. She has a classy look when she's not wearing her uniform, and I wanted to clean her up and show her off. I wanted to say to people, "Look what I found." I wanted her to be grateful to me. I like her better the way she is now. Since she broke up with me, I am more attracted to her than I was before. Her sloppiness is compelling, especially now, when she is not looking well. When she stands near me, I think about grabbing her by the hair and forcing her down into the filth on the floor. I want to watch her crawl around in it, smearing dust and dirt on her skin. I want her to look up at me as she kneels at my feet, and beg me to fuck her right there on the carpet.

I notice her looking at me and I know she has caught me staring. "What were you thinking about? You had a funny look on your face," she says. "Nothing at all. I'm just a little tired." She lets it go at that, and I let her pretend that she is not interested in what I

am thinking. I pour the wine and we sit on the sofa together. Caroline looks at me with a serious expression, a look that is almost confessional. "I'm actually glad you stopped by, Jack. I've been wanting to talk to you." I don't say anything. I want to know what she's up to, first. "You've been coming by the diner a lot lately," she says. "Is there a reason for that?" I know what she's looking for. She wants me to tell her that I can't stop thinking about her, that I was crushed when she ended the relationship and I want her back. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. And besides, I haven't been going by there that much. Just once or twice a day, like I always do.

She puts her feet up on the coffee table, crossing one leg over the other as she does it. Her jeans are tight and I know this is a deliberate move. If she can't get to me to say what she wants to hear, she'll get to me through sex. She'll tease me like she did when we were together. If she wanted something from me, a dinner at some place I couldn't afford to take her, or a movie I didn't want to see, she would put her arms around me until I could feel her breasts pushing against my chest. She thinks she can control me this way. What she doesn't realize is that I could have her if I wanted to. I could pin her right here on the sofa, and there's not a damn thing she could do about it. I could tie her arms together with dirty pantyhose and hit her if she screams. She's weak and I think she wants it. She would let me if I tried.

She picks up her glass of wine and looks at me. "Look, Jack. I think you've been coming by too much, and it's not a good idea. Do you know what I mean?" I know what she's implying, but I've always gone there, and now she wants to make a big deal out of it. She's trying, but she won't get me to say it. I won't tell her that I still want her. "I just come by for coffee, Caroline. It's no big deal," I say, and smile at her. I start to pour

another glass of wine but she stops me. "If you don't mind, Jack, I have to work tomorrow and I want to go to bed early." She stands up from the couch, and looks meaningfully at the door. I have an urge to break my wineglass and throw the pieces in her eyes. How can she be so rude to me, as if I'm the one who has done something wrong? I can't stand this. I feel the blood drain out of my face, and my hands tighten into fists. I need to get away from her. I take my wineglass into the kitchen, and when I set it on the counter, it cracks. I stare at the glass and count to ten, taking deep breaths. I will not yell at her. She did not invite me here. She did not say she wanted me back. She did not say she wanted me to spend the night. I will have to go back into the living room and look at her. I will have to say goodnight, and I will need to smile when I say it. If I don't, she will ask me if anything is wrong.

When I go to say goodbye, Caroline is standing up, stretching. A strip of skin shows beneath her sweater, and it reminds me of sitting with her once at the movies. I put my hand under her shirt to touch bare skin and had an impulse to get on my knees in front of her and lick the warm flesh at her waist. When I knelt down on the sticky floor and pulled up her shirt to bite the fold of skin just above her jeans, she pulled away from me, embarrassed. She tried to pretend she wasn't turned on. I wonder if she remembers this, too, and if she listened for me to return from the kitchen so she could stand up at just that moment to stretch for me.

"I'm sorry to kick you out like this, but I really need to get some sleep," she says, and then, "I'm glad we finally got a chance to talk." I walk to the door and only after I have opened it does she come near me. She is so close I can smell her hair. Something holds me there. Maybe I am expecting her to say something, to explain why she ever

asked me to call her, or why she wanted to talk. Or I am expecting her to give me some sign that she really does want me to stay—that she is too awkward to tell me, and is waiting for me to guess. Maybe she is testing me. If I don't take my chance, she may never give me another. I am frozen. She tells me, "Goodnight, Jack," and shuts the door in my face.

My car is parked in the back of the lot. When I was still deciding whether or not to go in, I didn't want Caroline to look outside and notice me sitting there. She lives on the second floor and I can see inside her window now that it is dark outside. I watch the shadows she makes when she passes in front of the curtains. Blue lights are flickering and I know she is watching television. I keep my eyes fixed on this light while I masturbate. I think about jacking off into one of junk mail envelopes scattered on the floor of my car and then slipping it under her door—my love letter to Caroline.

She has not been at the diner at all this week. I was going to call her, but I don't want her to get the idea that I care one way or the other if she's there. It's just that I would hate to think that something had happened to her. If she disappeared, it would be days before anyone would notice. They wouldn't care at the diner. She would just be one more waitress who didn't show up for work. It may just be that she's avoiding me. Maybe she's mad that I stopped by the other day without calling first. Or she's embarrassed because she was rude to me. Or she may be angry because she feels like I rejected her. I didn't pick up on her cues. When she said she wanted to go to bed early, she wasn't hinting for me to leave. She wanted me to stay. And when I got up to go, she

sent me another signal—the stretching. She was begging me to stay and I blew it. I completely missed her signals and now she thinks I don't want her.

In fact, I don't want her. Not as a girlfriend. Not anymore. There's a name for what she is. I finally looked it up. It's "vagina dentata"—the vagina with teeth. She's a monster. She promises sex and uses it as her hook. She thinks she can make me want her and keep me by her side so she can suck the life out of me. But she's been teasing me mercilessly and now she owes me something. I pick up the phone to call her. I will be subtle. I will pretend that I am concerned because she has not been at work. I will not let her know that I know what she wants from me.

"Caroline, it's Jack."

"Jack? Why did you call?"

"I noticed you haven't been at the diner, and I thought maybe something was wrong."

"I've been sick." There's a pause, and then she asks, "Jack, did you send me those flowers yesterday?"

"What flowers?" I'm sure she would love to hear that I sent them.

"Look, Jack, I told you. You can't keep calling me and coming to see me all the time."

"Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?"

"No," she sighs into the phone. "You didn't do anything."

"That's what you always say."

"I'm sorry, Jack. I don't want to talk about this anymore." And she hangs up on me.

I listen to the dial tone and try to figure out what Caroline is doing. What does she want from me? If she really wanted me to leave her alone, she would be mad at me, and she isn't. I want to go to her apartment and demand an explanation. I picture myself opening her door and taking her by surprise. It would be easy. She forgets to lock it half the time anyway. I could sneak in when she's in the bath. She would have nowhere to go. I could sit on the edge of the bathtub and force her to tell me. "Why do you pretend you don't want to see me, Caroline? Is this what you want?" I could grab her shoulders and pull her up and kiss her and hit her until her lips split and bleed and the water turns pink and she begs me to stop and I pull her out of the tub and push her onto the floor.

My hands are shaking so badly I can't light another cigarette. I drop the smoke and my match into the ashtray and pour cold coffee down the kitchen sink. I've got to get out of my house, take a walk, go for a drive—anything. This is just what she would want, for me to be sitting here thinking about her, getting angry. She's probably laughing about it right now. I can see her face turning red, her mouth open wide, hear her braying donkey's laughter, laughing so hard tears are coming out of her eyes.

I have not been by to see Caroline in two weeks now. I have not called her house. I think her hold on me has broken. I have thought a lot about the moment between us at her apartment, when she lay there innocently, at my mercy, and I lay myself across her face. The moment has the charm of a talisman for me. I do not need her because I know that I could have had her, and I chose not to. I know she is back at the diner now. I have stopped going there for coffee, but only because I wanted to. I've found a coffee shop that is a nice change of scene. I have to walk past the diner to get there though, and I

can't help it if I see her when I turn my head as I pass by the window. I never wave at her, even though she has seen me looking in more than once.

Today, when I pass by on my way home, cup of coffee in hand, I stop because I can see Caroline inside, talking to a customer—some man who is probably taken in by her smile, her soft voice, her deadly brown eyes. She smiles at him, laughs, briefly rests a hand on his shoulder. I remember her doing those things with me, flirting, willing me to be interested, to ask her out. And now I have caught her at it again. I wonder if she'll snare him. I wonder if he even realizes what is happening. It will be casual at first. He'll remember the little diner with the nice waitress, and he'll stop by more than once, thinking only of a pleasant lunch and a nice talk with Caroline. After a while, he won't be able to stay away. He'll find excuses to go, even when he's not hungry. He'll stop by at least once a day after lunch to buy a cup of coffee. And pretty soon someone will notice that he is spending too much time away from work—longer and longer lunch hours, more frequent breaks for coffee—until he gets fired. Then he will have all the time he needs to sit at the diner, or just walk past it to sit on the bench outside and pretend to wait for the bus.

I am suddenly aware that Caroline is looking at me through the window. Our eyes lock and I know she knows that I have caught her. I saw her with that man and I know what she is doing. I think about storming inside, throwing open the front door so that the glass smashes against the wall, and running over to her with shards in my hands. I would grab her by the back of the neck and force her to stand there while I reveal her dirty little secret: "Watch out for her. She has vagina dentata. Beware. She'll trap you like she

trapped me. She'll catch you in her sharp teeth and tear at you bit by bit and never let you go."

Before I can do anything, her boss comes outside. "Look, buddy, I told you not to come around here anymore. You think I don't see you but I do. If you don't stop following her, I'll call the police." I tell him I wasn't doing anything, that I was just stopping to read the menu taped to the window. It's a free country and I can go anywhere I want to, or even come inside the diner to eat lunch and no one can stop me. "Just get out of here," he says, and I do, but only because I was going to leave anyway. I don't know what Caroline told him, but it doesn't matter. I'm onto her.

Back at home, I run a bath and sit in the hot water until my hands stop shaking and my heart slows down. There's an ashtray on the side of the tub and I chain-smoke cigarettes while I try to relax. It's a small room and the air is choked with smoke and steam. Caroline's apron is floating on top of the water, an air bubble trapped underneath it. It no longer exactly smells of her, but there is still a faint greasy odor that will never wash away. Mostly, it smells of me, the front pockets filled with my lust for Caroline.

While I soak, I think about that night. I remember lying under her bed, listening to her breathe, afraid to move, and then creeping out when she was asleep. I can see it so clearly. I crept up to her and laid my penis across her face, and I remember how her breathing changed, how it sped up when I got near. I realize now that she knew I was there from the moment she walked into her apartment. She wanted me to come. That is why she left the door unlocked. She knew I was there, and she imagined me waiting for her, coming to her in the dark, throwing myself on her and begging her to fuck me at long last.

I've had no sleep now for days and I finally fall asleep in the bathtub. I dream that I'm standing in the diner with Caroline and I grab her arm and say, "Show them. Show everyone here what's wrong with you." She lifts her skirt and we all finally get to see what's waiting for us if we get too close. Even so, one man cannot resist her. She teases and denies, teases and denies, until he is insane enough to throw himself at her. And then, just when he thinks he is about to achieve his first burning moment of pleasure, he thrusts his dick into a row of sharp, perfectly-formed teeth and is severed, left writhing in agony on the floor. And Caroline, standing over him, laughing, says, "I told you there was something wrong with me." He cannot get up, he is paralyzed with pain and can only lie there, while his own blood drips onto his face from above.

I wake up horrified at the worst nightmare I've ever had. I know there aren't any monsters in real life, but I'm beginning to wonder about Caroline. Is what she does any less terrible than the vagina dentata? I want my revenge on her. She deserves to be punished. She deserves to be restrained, tied down to her kitchen table unable to move, while I examine her. I want to make sure it's safe. I know better, but what if I should happen to look and see a sharp row of teeth? Of course, it wouldn't happen, but I'll bring my pliers just in case. And if I happen to get a little excited just thinking about it, it doesn't matter. I will only be doing what is right, and when she is safely bound and gagged, with her own apron tied across her mouth, I can do what I want with her and she won't be able to stop me.

Caroline is at work now. It's the middle of her lunch shift. Her apartment building is empty and quiet, and there are only a few cars left in the parking lot. The passenger

side of my car is littered with empty styrofoam coffee cups, and the ashtray is overflowing with butts. I have been sitting here since last night. I don't plan to do anything, necessarily, but I wanted to keep watch, to make sure she didn't bring anyone home with her. I drove around the block so she wouldn't see me when she left for work this morning. When I came back, I walked up to her apartment and tried the door. It was locked, apparently both the thumb lock and the bolt are engaged, and since I can't cope with a deadbolt, I have been sitting here thinking.

It will be more difficult if she sees me coming. She will panic and try to run. If she makes a fuss, it will attract attention, and someone might try to stop me. No one will believe me if I explain about Caroline. I don't know what else to do, if I can't get inside her apartment. She never used to lock her door, but she must be on to me. That day at the diner, when our eyes met, she figured it out. I may have to wait awhile, let things cool off, stay away from her until she forgets about me. When her guard is down, I can make my move. It will take patience, but I've got all the time in the world.

Before I leave, I go back up to Caroline's apartment to slide an envelope under her door. I didn't put my name on it, but she'll know it was me. There's nothing inside it except a little bit of my love—the kind of message you don't have to sign. I stop at a gas station to buy one more cup of coffee, and on my way home, I drive slowly past the diner. I can see her, dimly outlined in the window, taking lunch orders from unsuspecting men. I am distracted, not paying attention to my driving, and I almost run a red light. I slam on the brakes and a pair of pliers flies off the passenger seat and smashes into the dashboard. I know that I could have hit someone or been killed. But I am being saved for something important. I can picture exactly how it will be—how she will pull against the

ropes, straining her back against the table, trying to get free, the look of horror on her face when she sees the pliers in my hand. “There’s something wrong now, Caroline,” I will say to her. “But don’t worry. It’s not you, it’s me.”

5. Getting Back to Normal

Jenna woke up at 9am on Saturday feeling disoriented. She'd been having a particularly vivid dream, and it had seemed so real. She almost expected to find John Salvor sleeping next to her, but when she turned her head to look, the left side of the bed was empty. She didn't get up immediately; she was reluctant to leave the dream behind. She had dreamt that she heard someone knocking on her door late at night and when she got up to see who it was, a strange man was standing there. "There's been an accident," he told her, and asked to use the phone. She let him in, and he closed the door behind him and when he turned around, there was a knife in his hand. "If you scream, I'll use this," he said, and suddenly she knew that he meant to rape her. He was looking at her face, but wouldn't meet her eyes, and she could see he was scared. "You don't have to do this," she said. "Think about it. You don't have to decide yet." He looked directly at her for the first time and slowly, slowly lowered the knife. "I knew you were the one," he said. "I chose you." And then, somehow, they were sitting at her kitchen table drinking coffee, not talking. They were holding hands, his arm lying on top of hers on the table. She could hear birds outside and knew the sun would be up soon. "Let's go to sleep," she told him. "You can decide in the morning."

It had not happened that way at all, of course. She had been raped and beaten, and although he had not cut her, in the hospital afterwards, when she was finally left alone to sleep, she'd wished that he had killed her. As she lay in bed and the dream lost its grip on her, she thought, "I'm glad now that he didn't kill me." It was something she told herself every morning. After an evening like the one she'd had the night before, it was necessary. She had sat in a bar all night by herself, quietly sipping a glass of wine and noticing that, although people turned her way, no one ever really looked at her. This morning, it was important to tell herself that at least she was alive.

The dream confused her because her dream-self had not been frightened—John Salvor had shown her the knife and she hadn't believed he would hurt her. It was so different from the way it had really happened, when she had been unable to move or think, and had been powerless to do anything but cry. She considered talking to her support group about her dream, but knew she wouldn't. They wouldn't understand a dream in which she made friends with her rapist. It would set her apart from them even more. It was the same reason she never told them about her scrapbook. Even her sister didn't know she had it. She imagined what would happen if Becky came over and found the ring-bound photo album lying on the coffee table. "What's this?" Jenna could hear her asking, and then "Oh my god!" when she realized it was full of news clippings about rape cases.

Jenna had started the scrapbook two months ago, and had gone to the library to find the newspaper with her own rape in it. She had dozens of rapes arranged in alphabetical order, her own among the B's: Sharon Bower, Patricia Brenner, Jenna Bussey. The rape became real to her when she could see it in print, with her own name in

black and white. Her life now, one year after the rape, was much as it had been, and it was easy to doubt that the rape had really happened. It was strange to think that something so horrible could happen and leave no traces in her life. She had added the other women for reasons she didn't fully understand, but it was comforting to see her name among them. She was guaranteed a place between Patricia Brenner and Grace Butler. She could add other names if she wanted to, and she would always have a place.

She still had not gotten out of bed. It was nice to lie there doing nothing, but she knew she wouldn't be able to fall asleep again, and she made herself get up and go downstairs to make coffee. She hated to wake up before noon, since it meant she had to find something to do in the hours before her 2:00 group meeting. It was easier to wake up late and read the newspaper until it was time to leave. Jenna considered skipping the meeting. That way, she could read the paper and then take a nap all afternoon. She had stayed out late Friday night, and when she drank wine, it wrecked her sleep. After breakfast, she would be drowsy and the urge to lie down would be irresistible. "I can't skip another meeting," she thought. If she did, it would be too easy to sit at home for the rest of the weekend, letting inertia keep her inside until it was time to go to work on Monday.

Jenna had been in the support group for three months and it wasn't helping at all. When she had first seen the ad in the classifieds, it had sounded interesting: "Support group for women who have been raped. Meetings at 2pm Saturdays at Grace Baptist church. We're not victims; we're survivors." The idea of not being a victim was appealing because, after the rape, it had become her identity. The nurses had referred to her that way in the hospital during her overnight stay; she'd overheard them in the halls:

“we have the broken leg in 304 and the rape victim in 305.” The therapist she had called told her on the phone that he “specialized in helping rape victims recover.” At her first support group meeting, Marie, the group leader, had greeted her at the door with, “Welcome, survivor,” and Jenna had almost hugged her.

She had enjoyed the group for the first month. After that, it grew monotonous: “My husband doesn’t love me anymore;” “My family is so unsupportive;” “I’m scared to be alone in my own home.” The women had killed her sympathy; they had dragged it out of her and slowly choked it to death. When they complained of being afraid, Jenna wanted to shout at them: “Why are you scared? What are the odds that you’ll be raped again?” None of them was a survivor; the rape had killed a part of them, and they tried futilely to get back to normal. Even though she could not respect them, Jenna was unable to leave the group. She was waiting for something, hoping that the meetings would improve, hoping that someone good would join the group and provide the answer they all seemed to be looking for. She was afraid to leave because she might miss something.

Just before 2:00, Jenna walked into the basement of Grace Baptist church. The other women were already there and were standing in the corners of the room talking in small groups. No one looked up when she walked in. They didn’t trust her because she sometimes missed meetings; except in cases of illness or death, none of the others ever did. Last time, one woman had made a comment about “people who only come when it’s convenient,” and it was partly for this reason that Jenna had come today.

There was a refreshments table against the wall and Jenna poured herself a cup of decaf, which she hated. There was never any regular coffee, and the only other option

was herbal tea. Someone had brought a large box of doughnuts, but they were picked over and only the raspberry-filled were left. Jenna stood by the table and sipped coffee because she was more relaxed when she had something to do with her hands. The other women glanced at her occasionally, but only a few of them smiled and none of them tried to speak to her. She saw Marie, the group leader, walking toward her wearing an “I’m a Survivor” t-shirt, the black letters projecting out from her bosom. She’d had the shirts made up specially and sold a lot of them through her Internet website, which hosted chat rooms and offered on-line counseling as well. Most of the other women in the group were wearing the survivor shirts, too.

“Hi Jenna,” Marie said. “I see you’re not wearing your shirt today.”

“No. I haven’t gotten around to doing the laundry yet,” Jenna lied. She used to wear it every week, back when she had been excited about the group. Now, it was stuffed in a bag of clothes she kept meaning to take to the Goodwill.

“You could buy another. Then you’ll always have one to wear.”

“Maybe I will,” Jenna said, and was relieved when Marie turned away to get a doughnut. Jenna wondered what Marie did when she wore her shirt in public and someone asked her what the message meant. She imagined someone standing there with open mouth as Marie gave her well-rehearsed answer: “I’m glad you asked. I was raped six years ago and I survived. His name is Jack Smith and he’s rotting in prison now. Jesus says we have to forgive, and I forgive him, because I know I’m going to Heaven one day and he’s going to burn in Hell.” Jenna had worn her shirt in public only once. She had stopped at a grocery store to pick up a few things after the meeting. The man in line behind her had asked what the message meant, and she had lied. Instead of, “I wear this

shirt because I am a survivor of rape,” as Marie had coached the group to say, she told him that she had gotten the shirt free with a donation to the Rape Crisis Center. Saying “rape” at all in association with herself was difficult. She wondered all the way home if the man would somehow know, and go home to his wife and tell her about the rape victim he had met at the store.

Jenna watched Marie walk away from the table eating bloody-red doughnut filling off of her fingers, and wondered how she could let herself get so fat. At Jenna’s first meeting, Marie had confessed that she had put on a lot of weight after the rape because she didn’t want men to find her attractive anymore. “She certainly succeeded,” Jenna thought. She couldn’t feel bad for her. After all, the rape had happened six years ago and Marie was still obese. “How can she live with herself?” she wondered, and was relieved when Marie finally called the meeting together.

She took the only chair left in the circle and sat between Debbie Harris and Tanya Schilling. The rumor was that they were secretly dating. Jenna had heard the other women talking about it again after last week’s meeting. She said hello to them and tried not to stare. Finally, Marie stood up and everyone was silent.

“Do we have anyone new today?” she asked, but no hands were raised. “Well, then, does anyone want to start us off?”

Kim Watson, one of the older women, raised her hand. “I’m having a problem at home,” she said. “It’s my husband. He won’t come near me anymore.”

“You mean, he won’t have sex with you?” Marie asked.

“That’s right. I want to, but he says he can’t. I mean, it’s been two years since I was raped and I think we should at least try.”

“I know what you mean,” Marie said. “I think everyone here can relate to that. Does anyone have any suggestions for Kim?”

Several women raised their hands and Jenna only half-listened to stories of men who were disgusted by their wives and girlfriends, or who were afraid to approach them. “It’s been four years for me, and my husband and I still don’t sleep together,” one woman said. “What about me?” someone countered. “I found out my husband was having an affair after I was raped!” It went on and on, until someone finally offered the survivor group mantra:

“Why can’t people just let us go back to normal?”

Jenna put her hands to her head and said, “Jesus Christ,” just loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Do you have something you want to say?” Marie asked her.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I don’t understand what “normal” means for all of you. I never used to leave the house, even before the rape. I was lonely. I don’t want that back. I keep thinking that if I hadn’t been alone at home that night, I never would have been raped.”

The others were silent for a minute. “What’s your name—Jennifer?” Debbie asked.

“It’s Jenna.”

“Jenna. What happened wasn’t your fault. He might have been following you. It could have happened at work, or anywhere else.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m saying that I was lonely before it happened. And then afterwards, there were all kinds of people calling and checking on me. Even my

Mom came to stay with me. Then everyone went back to their lives, and I had to go back to my terrible life.”

“You don’t really believe that. You’ve let that rapist take away your self-esteem,” Debbie said.

“It’s not about self-esteem. You don’t understand. It’s just that being raped gave me a chance to realize how pathetic I was. Think about it: it’s the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“You’re letting yourself be degraded just by saying that,” Marie said.

“I don’t feel degraded.”

“Obviously, you do. The rape took away your self-respect. You have to try to get it back.”

“I do respect myself. You’re not listening.”

“I think we’re all listening,” Debbie said. “We’re just not sure what you’re getting at.”

“I’m saying that if I hadn’t happened, I would be the same person I was before. You all keep saying that you want to get back to normal. You ought to think about whether that’s what you really want.”

“All right. I can see you’re upset,” Marie said. “But remember, you’ll get through this. You’re a survivor.”

Tanya said, “You know, I’ve been irritable lately, too. I can’t figure out why.” Everyone turned to her, happy to change the subject. Jenna looked around the room, but no one would make eye contact with her. She had challenged them, and they were not willing to face the fact that they could not get back to what they had once had. Kim

would never see that her marriage was over, that her husband would never look at her as a sexual being again. Marie would never admit that she wasn't going to get over her fear, and that there was no thin-Marie waiting for her on the other side. Jenna was tired of it; she was ready to give up on these women. Three months of drinking bad coffee, gossiping about Debbie and Tanya's possible lesbianism, and listening to upbeat clichés was enough. She stood up, poured the rest of her coffee on the floor and crushed the styrofoam cup with her foot. "This coffee is fucking terrible," she said.

"Calm down, Jennifer. You're among friends here," Marie told her.

"My name is Jenna," she said. "And you know what? I'm glad I was raped." She grabbed her purse from under her chair and, turning her back on all of them, walked calmly and deliberately out of the room. When she knew they could no longer hear her footsteps, she ran the rest of the way out of the church. She had to get away from them. Even the church was unbearable—the dark basement with only a few small windows set too high to let in light. How was anyone supposed to get better in the dark? The cloying smell of rotten apple cores and crayon wax left over from the church preschool gagged her, and she took a deep breath when she finally got outside. There were tears in her eyes, and she fought hard against them. She thought, "No one understands me," and pinched her own arm savagely. She would not allow any self-pity today.

She looked in the rearview mirror when she got into her car. Her face was white and her eyelids were puffy; her nostrils were flared and her hair was greasy from her nervous habit of running her hands through it. It was disappointing to think that she had looked so ugly while she was making her scene in the basement. "They're probably all sitting down there making fun of me," she thought, and the idea of big, fat Marie

criticizing her was almost enough to send her back into the church. She was ready for a fight, but those women were too passive to give her one. They wouldn't even fight for themselves—they were perfect victims. Probably none of them had ever had a dream like the one she'd had that morning. In the dream, she had been able to take control; she was the one with the power. She could tell them about it and they would all nod their heads and pretend to understand and then gossip later on about how crazy she was, the way they gossiped about Debbie and Tanya.

Jenna started her car, but she wasn't ready to go home. She decided to go by her sister's house to see if Becky was there. On the way, she stopped at a McDonald's for a large coffee. She wasn't going to pacify herself with soothing herbal teas like some kind of invalid. She wanted to be nervous and jittery and sick. She had almost finished it when she pulled into the driveway behind her sister's car. Becky had the door open before she was completely up the front walk.

"Marie just called here," Becky told her. "She said you were upset when you left the meeting and she was worried about you."

"Why did she call you?"

"She tried your house, but you weren't home."

"She was probably hoping I'd gone home to kill myself. It would give her stupid support group something new to talk about." Becky took her into the living room and Jenna sat on the sofa and told her what had happened. She tore her empty coffee cup into bits while she talked, and played with the pile of scraps on the coffee table.

"If you hate those women so much, then why did you keep going to group?"

Becky asked.

“I was hoping the meetings would get better. But all they can talk about is how unhappy they are and how they want to get back to normal.”

“What else do you expect them to talk about?”

“I don’t know. I just want them to understand that they’re not the same people they were. Kim’s husband realizes it. Why doesn’t she? And what about Debbie and Tanya? How can they talk about getting back to normal? They weren’t lesbians before the rape.”

“You should try to be a little more sympathetic. It doesn’t matter what they talk about, if it makes them feel better. Kim and Debbie and Tanya aren’t you. They deal with things in their own way.”

“That’s just it. They’re not dealing with anything. They just relive the rape and go over ground that we’ve covered and covered.”

“I think you should give it another chance. You need those women, even if you don’t think you do.”

“I’m not going to argue about it. I know what I need.”

“I can’t argue about it anyway. I don’t have time.”

Becky was having dinner with friends, and Jenna talked to her while Becky showered and got dressed. She envied her sister. Becky would never understand what it was like to be raped, and didn’t want to. Becky, too, was more comfortable with clichés. “Be more sympathetic.” “You need those women.” They sounded like lines from television.

“I’m leaving now,” Becky told her. “Go home and take a hot bath. Drink some herbal tea or something.”

While she drove home, Jenna tried not to cry because she had not been invited to go out with her sister. She made excuses for her. It might be a private dinner, or Becky might have thought she wouldn't want to go. Jenna couldn't stop herself from thinking, "Maybe she doesn't invite me out anymore because she's embarrassed by her rape-victim sister."

The message light was blinking on her answering machine when she got home, and she ran to check it, hoping that it was Becky calling to say, "I was so rude. It never occurred to me to ask if you wanted to come. I'll be there in ten minutes to pick you up." But the message was from Marie, asking her to call when she felt better. Jenna deleted it and went into the kitchen to mix a bourbon and water. She hated the sour taste—it was nauseating—but she liked the idea of having a drink. It was so sophisticated. When she sipped it, she could pretend that she was someone else, some mystery woman who'd had a hard life, someone more exciting than she was. She had purchased bottles of Jim Beam, Absolut, and Bacardi, things she had seen advertised in the magazines she flipped through at her new job. There were always magazines in the reception area, and she had time to look through them when she wasn't welcoming appointments, or talking on the phone. She had never been a drinker, but when she first started going out by herself, she had needed a drink to set the mood.

Jenna sat down on her living room sofa. She took her scrapbook from under it and lifted it onto her lap. It was growing slowly because it took so long to find articles. Some of them were clipped from the newspaper; others she had downloaded from the Internet and printed out. She had gone to the library last week to find articles about the women in her group, and some of them were included among the pages. Jenna found she liked them

more when they were just words on a page. Kim Watson, for example: “Kim Watson, fifty-two, was attacked and raped in a parking lot behind the Bank of America. She was walking to her car after work when a man approached her.” Jenna had lots of sympathy when she imagined her as a frightened woman who had heard footsteps behind her and was unable to make it to her car in time. Jenna mostly liked the articles about strangers, when she could imagine the women were more like her, that they wanted to be more than rape victims.

“The fact is,” Jenna thought, “being raped is the most exciting thing that ever happened to any of us.” Everyday events, even the happier ones, had such a short half-life; rape was something would last forever. She hadn’t exactly meant what she’d said that day in group—she wasn’t glad she had been raped. She always imagined people whispering, “rape victim, rape victim,” wherever she went. But it wasn’t just other people. She did it to herself. At her new job, she had overheard two of the secretaries talking about a woman who had been kidnapped and raped. They were fascinated by it: “I heard he kept her locked in his closet for three days;” “I heard it was four, and she was naked the whole time so he could use her whenever he wanted to.” Jenna was the new girl and neither of them had ever spoken to her. She had wanted to interrupt and tell them, “I was raped a few months ago,” and talk about her injuries, her bruises and cuts—the details she knew they would want to hear. Then, whenever she walked into the office, people would whisper, “that’s the woman I told you about—the one who was raped.” It was a victim-identity, but it might be better than no identity at all. In the end, she had decided against saying anything. After all, it was why she had left her old job. She had

gotten tired of the cloying sympathy, the refusal to look her in the face, the stares she could feel behind her back.

She remembered her evenings before the rape, when she would come home from work and turn on the television, getting up only to microwave a frozen dinner or to make salad from a bag of ready-mixed vegetables. She would watch TV until ten, and then take a book to bed and read until she fell asleep. Sometimes Becky would call and they would go out for dinner, and she would spend an hour getting ready, putting on her best clothes and makeup just to go to an Olive Garden.

After the rape, nothing had changed. Her mother had stayed with her for a week, and Becky had visited every day. They asked her constantly, “Are you all right? Do you need anything?” They gossiped with her about people they knew. She had looked through catalogs with her mother, both of them picking out the things they would buy if only they could afford them. “This is what it’s supposed to be like,” she had realized. When her mother had gone home, she started watching Becky closely, trying to figure out the differences between them. Becky was close to their mother. She dated. She did not stay home on weekends to watch television and read the paper.

Jenna wanted to go out, too. She started with the support group, and after that it became easier to find a coffeehouse to sit in after work, or a bar where she could drink a glass of wine. She went to movies alone, or sometimes with Becky. It wasn't much, but at least it was something. She wasn't like those other women—the ones in her group who were so miserable that it would have been a kindness if the rapist had killed them after he was done with them.

When the phone rang, she realized she had been sitting still for over an hour, flipping aimlessly through her scrapbook. “It’s probably Marie calling back,” she thought, and almost didn’t get up, but it would be better to talk to her now, when she was still angry enough not to let herself be pacified and talked into coming back to the group. It wasn’t Marie, though; it was her mother.

“Jenna, is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“Well, Becky called a while ago and said you were really upset. She said you were going to quit your group.”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Maybe you should. I always thought it was a bad idea—a bunch of women sitting around and talking about something so depressing. You don’t need to dwell on what happened. You should be moving forward, getting back to normal.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“It’s good advice. Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. I don’t have long to talk; I’m on my way out the door”

“What are you doing?”

“Someone told me about this outlet place that’s open until 7. I thought I’d drive down and look around while it’s not too busy. They have dishes and things like that, and I thought I’d find something for Becky. She never thinks about getting stuff for the house.”

Jenna hung up and wondered why her mother was buying things for her sister, who made good money and didn’t need anything anyway. She wondered, with her

birthday coming up in two weeks, if she would get more than a card and a check, with “Use this to buy yourself something special,” written under the Hallmark message. She realized she was angry with her sister. Becky told her mother that she was worried, but she hadn’t been worried enough to cancel her plans. She probably felt guilty about it, and figured she would ask their mother to deal with it instead. Jenna knew that neither of them really liked talking to her. They were afraid she wanted to talk about the rape. They were afraid she would come to them with a problem and expect them to deal with it.

There was a brief period after the rape when Jenna had felt close to her mother. She had stayed at Jenna’s, and it was almost like being a kid again and having the flu. Her mother brought her soup and ginger ale, and covered her with blankets while she lay on the couch watching TV. It hadn’t lasted. Her mother had returned home and called every other day and asked, “Have you gone back to work yet? When are you going? You shouldn’t just stay home and feel sorry for yourself.” Finally, Jenna had stopped answering the phone or returning her calls, and now her mother just asked Becky when she wanted to know anything.

After talking to her mother, Jenna realized she was tired. She wanted to put on comfortable clothes and maybe read a book, or watch the news. She had to fight against lethargy. “I can’t make a habit of staying home,” she thought, and stood up from the couch. It was well after 5:00, late enough to go out for a drink. She took a fast shower and dressed in a knee-length skirt and a sleeveless shell top. She didn’t have fashionable clothes like Becky did, but she looked fine as long as she wore all black. She was afraid of looking ugly when she went out. If her hair wasn’t perfect, or if she dressed in jeans,

she felt she had no right to sit among other people. Before she left, she put a novel and a small notebook in her purse.

She went to a French restaurant that had a small bar in the back, and the bartender smiled, said hello, and asked, “House red, right?” She sat at the far left of the bar. It was U-shaped, and she had a good view of the door and the few small tables arranged along the wall. She took out her book and opened it. The bar was empty. At that hour, most people were eating dinner. Loud jazz was playing on the overhead speakers, and it would be impossible to read. She looked at the bartender, wanting someone to talk to, but he was standing at the other end of the bar washing glasses, and filling drink orders brought in by the wait staff.

Jenna took out her notebook. She had intended to use it for a journal, not realizing at first how little she would have to say. Marie had suggested that she write down her thoughts about the rape. So far, she had written a few terrible poems, a couple of grocery lists, and sentences that were intended as beginnings, but led nowhere. “I am sitting in a bar by myself, writing in a journal,” she had written. And on another page, “Marie Bennett tried to talk to me today about what it felt like to be raped.” The blank pages were tempting; she would have liked to fill them. Tanya Schilling had once brought three notebooks of poetry to the support group and left them on a table, saying that she hoped everyone would feel free to read them. Jenna had looked at one: “I hear him coming for me in the dark/ I cringe before him./ In this moment, he is everything to me.” She had wanted to laugh. Writing about rape made it sound so trivial, like they were all living in a made-for-TV movie.

She only wrote in her journal on nights like this, when she wanted to look like she didn't care about being alone. She held a pen in her right hand and kept it just over the page, as if she might write something at any moment. When she looked up, she was surprised at how quickly the bar had filled up. There was a woman standing two seats down from her. She, too, was dressed all in black, but on her it was sexy and mysterious; on Jenna, it was camouflage. The woman was talking with the bartender, laughing, and she accepted the drink he offered her. When she turned, Jenna could see her face standing out against shiny black hair, her white makeup, red lips, and black-lined eyes. Jenna couldn't stop staring.

"I wish I could be her," Jenna thought. She thought about dyeing her hair, buying new clothes, dressing as someone else. And she remembered dressing up that evening, fixing her hair in a French twist, carefully lining her eyes and lips to make them stand out, feeling confident in black. She had avoided looking in the mirror because she knew it would destroy her. She would see her own face peering out from behind a mask of makeup. Looking at the woman at the bar just now had the same effect. It destroyed her illusions. "I'm not changed at all," she thought, and wanted to run from the bar.

The bartender walked by, and Jenna asked him for another glass of wine. Without it, she had no right to be there. She drank it slowly because what she really wanted to do was leave—to go home, put on sweatpants, and watch television until she fell asleep—and the wine was her anchor. It kept her from fleeing. The bar was crowded now. Someone bumped into her. People were pushing in on both sides to order drinks. She wished she could shrink inside her own skin and disappear, and not have to face the embarrassing ordeal of getting up and walking through the bar to the door. "Why did I sit

all the way back here?" she thought. She told herself that it was really no big deal, that no one would notice her. Still, she could not let herself leave. She knew it was more than a simple decision between another glass of wine or going home.

She turned to her journal and wrote, "The worst thing about the rape is that it made me want to change. I was better off when I was lonely and I didn't know any better. Now, I want to be different, but I can't change anything." She wondered what would happen if she went up to the black-haired woman to introduce herself. What could she say that would possibly make them friends? "Hi. I'm Jenna. I was raped ten months ago." It was the only thing about her that mattered.

She decided to stay in the bar and have one more glass of wine. As she drank it, she looked around the room and noticed that she was the only person alone. There were regulars she had come to recognize, and they almost always came in by themselves, but the bartenders spoke to them, or the waitresses, or the other regulars. The bartender had recognized her today, had even remembered what she drank, and if she kept coming, he might even ask her name. "I see you in here a lot," he might say. "What's someone like you doing here all alone?" He might even give her a free drink sometime, and tell his friends at the bar, "This one is for the lonely lady."

Jenna paid for her last drink, left a two-dollar tip on the bar, and went outside. She stood under a neon Budweiser sign and pretended to look for her keys. She looked through the plate-glass window at the people still inside. "Why can't that be me?" she wondered. The black-haired woman was just leaving, walking out between two men, laughing with them. The woman never looked at her, even though the hem of her skirt brushed Jenna's as she passed by. "Bitch," Jenna whispered, and felt petty and mean.

She walked to her car and drove home in silence, not wanting to turn on the radio. The silence complemented her mood, and she didn't want risk ruining perfect self-pity with an upbeat song. When she got home, there was nothing to do but go to bed. She fixed one more drink—bourbon and water again—and set it by the bed while she went to wash her face. She looked into the mirror and tried to see a sophisticated woman, someone magnetic, charming, and mysterious, trapped behind her plain, pale face. There was nothing. She looked at her black skirt and top lying in the hamper, her high-heeled shoes on the bedroom carpet, and knew she was pathetic.

Before she got into bed, she took her scrapbook from the living room. Somewhere among these women was someone else who felt that the rape had stripped her of an identity. There had to be someone else who felt as uprooted as she did. Jenna flipped through her book and imagined going to visit Sharon Campbell, or Barbara Daniels, or Jennifer Davis, if she could find them. What would they say when she showed up on their doorstep? She could tell them, "I'm a rape victim, too." And probably, just like the rape survivor group, they would offer her bad coffee and herbal tea, and try to drive her away. "Go home," they would tell her. "Try to get back to normal."

Jenna put the scrapbook under her bed. She looked at the clock before she turned the light out. It was 4am. If she was lucky, she would be able to sleep past noon. She remembered that the Sunday paper always had a good crossword puzzle, and imagined herself filling in the answers, lying on the couch, and dozing off after breakfast. There was nothing she had to do, nowhere she had to go. Unless Marie called, it was unlikely that the phone would ring. She could always take her crossword puzzle to a coffee shop instead of staying home all day, but there was really no point. She couldn't force herself

to go out every day. It was humiliating to sit in a room full of people and have them look past her, not seeing her at all. The only way to prove she existed was to look in her scrapbook.

“I don’t want to be a rape victim,” Jenna thought. “I don’t want to be a survivor.” She didn’t want to be anything. There was only one option open to her, and as she fell asleep she knew she couldn’t fight it. It was time to get back to normal.

6. Sandra

Sandra meets the new man on one of her daily walks. He follows behind her until she can no longer ignore him. When she turns, he apologizes: "I'm sorry. I don't mean to stare, but you're absolutely beautiful." Because he is attractive, because he dares to look her in the eye, she speaks to him. "For that, I should at least buy you a cup of coffee." They go to a café and drink coffee that neither of them really wants. She pretends not to notice his hand on her knee.

She invites him home, but she is careful. They do not leave the café together, and she directs him to the alley behind her house, where he enters through the basement. It excites her to see him near the bins she keeps down there. He does not know it, but he is walking past the remains of other men. It is a pity she met him on the street. It would be better if she had seen him first, at his job, or in his house. Then, she could have waited, savoring the moment. It is so hard to find a good victim. She could have saved him for her birthday, which is coming up soon, but she cannot always choose who she will bring home, and she is hungry. She will not wait.

It does not take long to get him to her bed. Fortunately, she is prepared. The sheets are clean, the rubber pad is hidden beneath them. Sheets she can always buy, but mattresses do not come cheap. She is not poor, but she does have to economize. Sandra

strips in the bathroom and comes out wearing leather. The pants are crotchless. The harness buckles around her throat and has thin leather straps that cross over her nipples and buckle in the back. As always, she wears her boots.

“Don’t you want to know my name?” he asks. “I don’t even know what to call you.” Perhaps her leather is making him nervous. Perhaps he senses her power. Perhaps he sees the nine-inch dildo in her left hand and is wondering what she intends to do with it.

“No names,” she says. There will be no talking unless it is absolutely necessary. When she hands him the dildo, he looks relieved. Sandra does not want him to touch her, and when she unzips her pants, he seems to understand. He holds the dildo steady while she straddles it on the bed. When she is in position, the sex toy securely inside her, it leaves his hands free. He touches himself while he watches her, and when she sees his eyes close, she reaches for the knife under the mattress and slashes at his neck. She is not good at this part. It takes two more cuts before he is finally still. Sandra leaves the knife on his chest and finishes using the dildo.

After she is done, she sits on the bloody sheets in total silence. She does not move for hours, and the afternoon fades into dusk. Blood stains her hands and dries to a crackling glaze on her skin; the rest congeals in a clammy, gummy puddle on the sheets. A clock on the bed-table keeps time. When she kills, she rates her own performance. Her skills have improved. This time, everything was more natural, and she reacted almost reflexively. She tries not to think about the bad job with the knife; it will only ruin her image of a perfect murder. She waits to feel remorse, repentance, even revulsion, but killing is such a common occurrence now that she rarely feels anything. Still, it is

necessary to do this, to watch over the body, waiting to feel something for this man. She is practicing. If she performs this ritual every time she kills, eventually there will be no trace of human feeling left in her at all.

She looks at her victim, preparing for what is to come. Alive, he was exceptional—handsome, tall, muscular—overall, the finest she has ever brought to her home. Dead, he is merely beautiful. She does not mind touching him now. She strokes his dark hair, runs her hands through it to his scalp, and wraps a single strand around her finger, watching as it turns red, then purple, and begins to throb. She sighs and throws the hair away. Her vigil is important, but it is also boring. This man, though he was a perfect victim, ultimately interests her no more than all the others, and his fate will be the same. He is taller than most and she knows the ritual will take at least six days. As usual, she will start with the hands.

Sandra takes the knife from his chest. It would not be difficult to break his hands apart, but she prefers to cut through the connective skin and tissue, rather than tearing the fingers off. After all, she is not a savage. She frees his left index finger and puts it in her mouth. It is slightly tough with calluses, but she manages to chew and swallow most of it. She spits out the fingernail, which is edible but not to her liking, and licks the bone clean. His blood leaves a rich, metallic taste in her mouth, something she has learned to enjoy. Some blood is slightly sweet, some is bitter. This man was a smoker and has the flavor of burned tobacco.

She has fasted for weeks, preparing for this moment. She will work steadily until all the edible parts are consumed. Sandra is a saprophyte; she has trained herself to eat decaying flesh. No part of his decomposition will be distasteful to her. In fact, it will

improve the flavor of her favorite parts, which she will save for last: his heart, which is the seat of his soul; his brain, which is the seat of his intellect; and his penis, which is the seat of his power. She will take on his strengths as she eats his flesh.

She cannot leave her bed for two weeks. For days, she lies there, too sick and full to move. When she is able to walk around without being assaulted by nausea, she collects bones and indigestible parts and moves them to a large Rubbermaid bin in the basement. The sheets from her bed she puts in a garbage bag and places in the trash. The rubber mattress pad rinses off easily in the shower, and she stores it under the bed for quick access.

It is necessary to leave the house. The smell has begun to bother her and she wants to air out her bedroom. Before she leaves, Sandra showers carefully. There is blood under her fingernails, in her hair, in the creases of her knees and elbows. When she smiles in the mirror, she can see pieces of flesh in her teeth. She flosses carefully before she brushes them. She checks her hair and notices the roots are showing. After two weeks in bed, she needs to shave her arms, her legs, her pubic hair. After her shower, she applies rubbing alcohol with a sponge. She is not afraid of germs from the dead body. She simply enjoys feeling clean and sterilized.

Naked, she is oddly stunning. Her skin is untouched by the sun; it is translucent. Her body is completely shaved. She has no moles or birthmarks, and no freckles at all. Her collarbones and ribcage are prominent, her hipbones sharp-edged. Her hair is straight and black and falls to her waist. It takes time to get it to look this way, but she is willing. She enjoys stark contrasts and has covered up her own naturally blond hair. She shaves

her eyebrows as well, because they are so light, and draws them on again with black eyeliner.

After her shower, she dresses entirely in black. Her long skirt reaches to her ankles and is skin-tight, and it will be difficult to walk or sit down. Her boots go up to her knees and it takes several minutes to lace them completely. It is warm outside, so she will not need the leather trench coat. Her head she covers with a black scarf. She puts on sunglasses with immense frames because she must be able to see without being seen. She pulls on a pair of thin leather gloves before she opens her door and steps out into blazing sunshine.

It is a humid day in June, and it is just after noon, but it doesn't matter. Sandra does not sweat. She begins walking, taking measured steps that are bound by the hem of her skirt. It will take an hour to get downtown. She does not drive, and she will not take the bus, though one makes regular stops less than a block from her home. When she is not feasting, she makes this trip every day. She feels it is important to walk among the people. They will benefit simply by being near her. She believes she is god-like. It is possible that she may even be a god. She aspires to it. She meditates regularly and keeps herself pure. She treats her body as a temple, and tries to eat only lean, healthy victims.

She does not like to speak to people, and rarely allows them near her. When she finds victims, people nearly worthy of her attention, she takes them home where she gets to know them, loves them briefly, and eats them. Those she chooses are always beautiful, always strong. Her victims are always male. She took a woman home only once, but her flesh had tasted of tears. Even though men are physically stronger, she is never challenged. The promise of sex trumps their better judgment, even when she gets them

home and shows them her devices. She will not allow them to penetrate her, ever. She does not wish to soil herself in that way. Instead, she buys sex toys. They are large and imposing. No man could ever live up to their proportions, and after seeing her vast dildo collection, most men are unwilling to try. She almost always wears a bondage suit with a zippered crotch, to minimize skin-to-skin contact. She is naked only after she kills. Flesh is corrupt, but blood is pure and she likes to feel it on her body.

Sandra is on her way now to find a new man. She is not yet ready to eat, but it takes time to meet good victims. She stops to rest, sitting outside at a café. She lights a cigarette and a waiter brings black coffee in a paper cup. No one has to ask for her order; she is well known around town. She has made it clear that she will not use cups from which others have drunk. As she sips, she surveys. The coffeehouse is always full of the kinds of men she prefers—healthy, young, college students. It is also a magnet for local artists. It is the trendy place to gather until the bars open at night. Even dressed as she is, she is not overly conspicuous. She could easily pass as one of the many eccentric poets and musicians who fill the café. She will not take any of this type home with her. She finds it difficult to bear their angst. There are several beautiful young men on the patio, but there are none who can look at her for long. She will not take home the timid. It is time to move on.

Sandra walks into the Gap. She surveys the customers and buys a tank top. It is an unlikely place for her to shop, but it is economical and sells a lot of black clothes. Just down the street is a kinky sex shop, and she stops there next. They sell the tight leather pants she prefers to wear, but their items are too warm to be worn in June. There are a lot of bondage items, and she looks through the merchandise, needing an excuse to stay

inside the store. There are men here she considers good enough. The customers who shop here are not afraid to look her in the eye.

She takes a spiked dog collar to the register. The man behind the counter rings up her purchase. He recognizes her and asks, "Is this for you or for someone special?"

Sandra knows how to play this game, and she has been considering this man for months. "Oh, it's for someone special. I'll give it to him when I meet him."

"Well, whoever he is, be sure to tell him I envy him." He hands her the bag and she holds his gaze briefly. She can feel him watching her as she leaves the shop.

It is time to go home and Sandra begins the long walk, now carrying her purchases. Money comes to her infrequently and though she shops daily, she does not overspend. Everything she buys is on sale. The money she gets comes from her victims. She does not like to think of herself as a thief. When she takes their money, she thinks of it as an offering they have made to a god. She can afford to do as she pleases, and she will never work. It is too banal. When her funds are low, she carves tiny sculptures from human bone and sells them at art shows. This, at least, is not beneath her dignity. Even Jesus was a carpenter.

Sandra seems almost human during the times when she is not eating men. In the mornings, she cleans. In the afternoons, she walks downtown. At night, she tries to meditate. Frequently, she soaks in her bathtub trying to cleanse the stench of humanity from her skin. She wishes she could wash away the skin itself. It is difficult to be a god trapped in corporeal form. Perhaps soon, if she consumes enough people, the ingested power will enable her to leave her body behind. She imagines her supreme essence

spreading over the earth, as she drowns in the tub. She is not dreaming; she is delirious. She has not eaten for weeks, and can no longer sustain her fast. It is time to dine again.

She wakes early in the morning and makes her bed. She uses the rubber mattress pad. She dresses in leather pants, spike-heeled boots, and a simple long-sleeve top. She must lure her victim, but knows she will not have to try very hard. The shoes will hurt her feet during the long walk, but the pain is unimportant. She prefers to think in terms of results. As always, she will get what she wants.

Her plan is to go into the sex shop and make a date with the man who works there, but when she gets to the café, she is tired. The long walk in spike heels in summer heat is killing. She runs a hand through her long hair, feels the tangles, and is afraid it has become frizzy. She uses a straightening iron on it at home, but in this heat, there is no way to keep it smooth. She can't go into the sex shop looking like this. She will punish herself for her messy appearance and take home someone else. Fortunately, the café patio is full. There are several young men sitting at tables behind her, and she can feel them looking at her. She always knows. When she finishes her coffee, she walks over to the one sitting by himself. "Do you have the time?" she asks, and he tells her that it's only 10am. She puts a hand on his shoulder and leans over him to see the watch herself. "So late?" she says. "I usually try to have sex before 9. I must be losing my touch."

He blushes, but he laughs and does not turn away. His face is pale and his hair is thinning. He wears glasses, and she cannot tell what his body is like under the over-sized T-shirt. If she were not starving, she would never have approached him. Still, even seated, she can tell he is tall, and he has a strong jaw. Without his glasses, he may look handsome. If not, she can always cover his face. "I'll give you time to think about it," she

tells him, and bends over him again to write her address on a napkin. "I'll be there after 3," she says, and walks away. If he does not show up, she will have plenty of time to find someone else.

Sandra wants time to go home and shower again, so she must hurry. She stops by the Gap and buys only socks. In the kinky sex shop, the door chimes when she opens it, and although she knows the man behind the counter has looked up, she does not speak to him. She lingers in the aisles, making a mental list of the devices she would like to try. "You sure come in here a lot," he calls to her. She looks at him, taking off her huge sunglasses, and says only "Yes." He does not look away, and she wonders how he can stand to meet her gaze for long. It must be like looking into the sun.

She turns her back on him and looks at the shelves. There is nothing in here she wants, but she needs a reason to go to the register, to stand close to him and let him feel her power. She chooses a tremendous dildo that is guaranteed to glow under blacklights, and when she walks up to the counter, he smiles at her. "Are you sure you're ready for something that big?"

"I think so." She pauses. It is demeaning to engage in this kind of exchange, but she must do it. "I may need someone to help me with it, though."

"I'm a professional. Maybe I could show you how to use it."

"Maybe you could," she tells him. "I'll let you know."

She has wasted too much time. She should kill the sex shop man soon if only because he is a distraction from her routine. But she can't think about him now. After her long walk home, she gets into the shower and washes her hair, which she had washed that morning. When she is sterilized and dry, she rubs Vaseline over her body and slips into a

latex suit. It has a deep V-neck that ends just above her navel. Her arms, legs, and back are completely covered. She would prefer not to leave even a small amount of skin exposed, but it is such a sexy suit and it fits her so well, that she is willing to bear it. She wonders if her college boy will come, but it's a waste of time to think about. Of course he will come.

He arrives fifteen minutes late, and by then, she is pacing the room and looking out of the windows. He knocks on the front door. She has forgotten to tell him to use the alley, but most of her neighbors are at work and no one will see him. He is nervous, and it will take a long time to prepare him for the ritual. She leads him to her room and he hangs back in the doorway, looking at her shelves filled with dildos, vibrators, strap-ons, and things he would not be able to identify. "What's all this for?" he asks. She will have to talk to this one to relax him.

"I have an interest in sex toys. I collect them."

"Do you use them?"

"Of course. How else will I know which ones are worth collecting?"

She takes his hand. She did not put gloves on because her hands were greasy from the Vaseline, and she can feel his clammy, sweaty palms. She knows he would like to touch her, and she steels herself for the feel of his cold sweat. She leads him into her room and when he is seated on the bed, he puts his arms around her and presses his face into her bare stomach. Quickly, brutally, she grabs his thin hair and jerks his head back. The place where his mouth touched her burns. "Don't do that again," she says.

She gets a ball-and-gag from her shelf and asks if she can put it on him. The device will keep him from speaking, or from touching her with his loathsome mouth, and

the strap will fit over his head and hide his receding hairline. She was right—without his glasses, he is almost handsome. She cannot pleasure herself in the latex suit. There are no openings. It is just as well. She wants to kill this one quickly.

Sandra finds her knife, not even waiting until his eyes are closed. He sees it in her hand and tries to get up. He cannot yell, but he is moaning loudly and the gag is wet with spit. Sandra tackles him and they both fall back on the bed. She places her hands on his chest and kneels over his face, pressing her buttocks firmly over his nose and mouth. She squeezes his head between her thighs and he cannot shake her loose. She is unnaturally strong for a woman. He is panicking, and between the ball-and-gag and the latex, he passes out. Sandra finds her knife and slits his throat neatly.

It takes a whole week to eat this one. He is bigger than she had expected and she has to peel layers of fat from his skin before she can eat it. Next time, she will not let herself get so hungry. When her blood sugar is low, she will eat almost anyone.

Sandra wants to visit the kinky sex shop one more time. She will have to move again soon, and has already found a house in another town, one that is close to a shopping mall, which she is excited about. Her birthday is today and she has decided that she must eat the sex shop man before she goes. She is not particularly hungry, but she may try freezing what she cannot finish and taking it with her. It may take some time before she is comfortable enough to hunt for victims in her new town.

She still has to have her coffee and do some shopping, and she tries to leave herself plenty of time. Her dress is long and low-cut, sleeveless, with a high slit on the side. She wears elbow-length gloves. Her hair is freshly dyed and it gleams. Only her

upper arms and face are uncovered, and they are so white they reflect light. It has taken her hours to bathe and dress. She had set her alarm clock early so she would be ready in time, and has spent most of the day in front of her bathroom mirror.

She has killed only once more since her college boy, and she feels well rested and well fed. This last kill is for pleasure. It is her birthday gift to herself. She walks slowly, not wanting to mess up her hair, and goes to her café. She can feel people staring, and for a moment, she wonders if she has made herself too conspicuous. She is the only black and white figure among these people. They will remember her. She drinks her coffee slowly, and orders a second cup. The stares annoy her, and she forces herself to stay because they should not matter. She is probably just over-eager, tense, wanting to get to the best part of her day.

She barely glances at the things in the Gap, and for the first time, she does not buy anything. She comes in so often, she has two of everything they sell in black. Lately, she has taken to buying colors because there isn't anything else. She can always buy fabric dye and change them to black. They will not be the right shade of deep, blue-black, but she can always wear them around the house. She does not want to waste them.

When she is ready, she walks slowly to the sex shop. There is no need to hurry now. The anticipation is always the best part anyway. She has been spending more and more time there. When she goes, she plans to spend only a few minutes, but the man always talks to her and she finds she cannot walk away from him. At first, he just asked questions: "Where are you from? What's your name? Are you seeing anyone?" But now, he is more personal. He tells her, "I can tell that you're not like anyone else. You don't even look like you're from this world." Once, he told her, "I think we've got a lot more in

common than you think.” She can never tell if these are just pick-up lines, or if there is something behind them. His attention is flattering, no matter what his motives, and she finds herself blushing when she thinks about him. This is why she is so anxious today: he has made her blush, and now she will kill him. Before he dies, he will learn that she is more than just a silly woman.

He is busy with customers when she gets there, and it is just as well. She can check her appearance once more in the dressing room mirror. She smoothes her hair, though it’s perfectly in place, and walks back into the store. She stands near him and watches him showing his wares. His hands move over the display of dildos, lifting each one, turning it to show the different features. When he picks up the 12-inch dildo in black, made entirely of blown glass, she has to walk away. She sits in the dressing room again and tries to slow her heartbeat. She knows from the way he moved his hands over it that this is the one she should buy. When she saw him touching it, she had pictured using it with him and then taking it out, still damp from being inside her, and smashing it on the nighttable. She could use the pieces to cut his throat.

His customers have gone, she can tell by the silence. Sandra picks the glass dildo up and carries it to him, like an offering. From the way he smiles, she can tell he knows she was watching him.

“How much is this one?” she asks. The number he quotes is far out of her price range, especially for something she intends to destroy. But it’s her birthday. If she wants it, she should have it.

“Are you going to buy it?” he asks.

“I will, if you’ll help me use it.”

“You know I will. Just tell me when and where.” Despite his words, he seems surprised when she writes her address on the back of her receipt.

“Don’t come in the front. I’ll leave the back door open for you.”

Sandra sits on her bed while she brushes her hair. She is completely naked. Her new dildo sits on the nightstand, still wrapped in tissue paper, because she does not want to risk chipping it. She does not put on any of her outfits. She tells herself that, because he sells them, it will mean nothing if he sees her wearing one. At exactly 7, she hears a sound in the basement, and footsteps coming up the stairs. He comes into her bedroom and she is still sitting there, in her room with the black walls, the black rug, and the colorful dildos ranged along the walls. Sandra can see herself in the ceiling mirror. Amidst all the black, she looks very small. When she stands, though, she is taller than he is.

“Why are you still dressed?” she asks him.

“Aren’t you even going to say hello?”

“Don’t talk. Please don’t talk.” If he speaks, it will ruin everything. He takes his clothes off, and she watches. She can tell from his damp hair that he has recently showered. Even though he is very thin, his muscles are clearly defined. His skin is almost as pale as her own, and his hair is dark. In the ceiling mirror, they look like twins.

He kisses her when she is not expecting it and for a minute, she lets him. When she pulls away, she feels dizzy, a little bit ill. She has everything planned. She will not let him ruin this for her. He walks to the bed and she follows him. When he tries to push her down, she resists him. There are handcuffs on the nightstand and when she picks them

up, he puts out his hands. She arranges him on the bed and cuffs each of his hands to the bedposts. When he is prone, defenseless, she kneels next to him. Now that she is in control, she does not mind kissing him. She even lies on top of him, putting as much of her skin on his as she can. His flesh is warm, and the heat that comes from it is dry, oven-like. She is drowsy and rests her head on his shoulder.

It takes all of her strength to reach out a hand and find the dildo. He looks up when he hears her touching the tissue paper, and she wonders what he will do when she smashes it. She holds it carefully, trying to see through the jet-black glass, but it is completely opaque. She turns it over and over, but she cannot find a flaw anywhere in its surface. When she looks at him again, he is still smiling. She wonders why she is drawing this out. It is almost cruel not to do it quickly.

“You’re beautiful,” he tells her.

“I told you not to say anything,” she says. But it’s too late. She wants to kiss him, hold him, love him, but she can’t. When he speaks, it is too obvious that he is nothing at all like her. Nothing he says is meaningful. It’s all rehearsed, things he would say to any woman. Doesn’t he know? She is not beautiful; she is magnificent! He cannot be allowed to trivialize her.

She sets her dildo down carefully and opens the nightstand. Her knife is there, still bloody from the last time she used it. He is not special. She does not love him. She does not need him. This man will never be her equal. She can only use him.

She raises the knife to his neck. “Are you ready?” she asks, as she has asked other victims dozens of times before. She only wishes that she had thought to bring a birthday candle, so that she could make a wish and blow it out before she eats him.

Vita

Sarah Elizabeth Blakistone was born on February 4, 1977, in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Her family soon moved to Lafayette, Louisiana, where she lived for six years. They moved away, for reasons both personal and climate-induced, to Charlottesville, Virginia, where she grew up, attended Charlottesville High School, and later went to Piedmont Virginia Community College. Blakistone transferred to the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where she majored in English Literature and graduated with Highest Honors.

Currently, she has finished her Master's Degree at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, and will graduate in August of 2003. In September, she will begin teaching English at Halifax County High School in South Boston, Virginia, which she hopes will be a good experience.

